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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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India 118th in happiest nation, Afghanistan last

India ranked 118th in the World Happiness Report 2025 published on Thursday, up from the 126th position in the previous year but below countries such as Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine and Palestine. Here are the top happiest countries:

1. Finland
2. Denmark
3. Iceland
4. Sweden
5. Netherlands
118. India
147. Afghanistan

>>>More on Page 6

Trump to shut down US Education Department

WASHINGTON, 20 MARCH

US President Donald Trump is set to sign an executive order calling for the shutdown of the US Education Department, a White House official has revealed. This move advances a long-standing campaign promise to eliminate the agency, which has been a target of conservatives. Trump has repeatedly criticized the Department of Education, branding it "wasteful" and "polluted by liberal ideology". However, dismantling the department entirely is likely to require an act of Congress, which established the agency in 1979. The Trump administration has already begun gutting the agency through layoffs. *—PTI*

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BEL engineer held for leaking defence secrets to Pak

BENGALURU 20 MARCH

A senior engineer from Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) was arrested by intelligence agencies for allegedly leaking classified defence information to Pakistan in Bengaluru on Thursday. The accused Deep Raj Chandra, 36, worked at BEL's Product Development and Innovation Centre and lived in Mathikere. Originally from Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad, Chandra had access to critical defence-related data due to his role at the defence Public Sector Undertaking.

—Salar News

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K'taka sees zero rape convictions since 2023

HAMEED ASHRAF

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

The State saw 1,461 rape cases registered between 2023 and 2025, but not a single one ended in conviction. The dismal zero conviction rate comes even as 1,662 accused were arrested, according to the Karnataka Home Ministry's latest crime report..

The alarming report comes in the wake of an Israeli national and a local woman being gangraped in Hampi. The police have arrested the accused in this case.

The incident shocked the State, yet it follows a disturbing pattern of repeated sexual violence cases with no justice achieved and rapists let out of jails. The zero conviction highlights deep-rooted flaws in our legal system.

Conviction rates are declining despite rising cases

According to the State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB) report, the State has witnessed a declining conviction rate in rape cases over the years. In 2021, the conviction rate stood at 11.7 per cent, which dropped to 8.4 per cent in 2022.

However, the report does not include Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act cases.

Legal experts and activists argue that unless stringent measures are implemented to ensure successful prosecution, the rising number of rape cases will continue to go unpunished, further emboldening the rapists.

SALAR EXCLUSIVE

A senior IPS officer in Bengaluru, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Salar News,

"Most cases collapse due to weak evidence, delayed investigations, and victims turning hostile during trials. Ensuring speedy justice requires stronger forensic capabilities and better witness protection."

An official from the Karnataka Home Minister's office said victims and their families often face pressure to withdraw complaints or settle cases out of court, which leads to low conviction rape. "Judicial backlogs and procedural delays further weaken prosecution efforts," he added.

Meanwhile, the report says that hundreds of cases are pending trial in courts, and a limited number have reached the final judgment stage. *—Salar News*

>>>More on Page 2

Minister alleges 48 leaders in State were honey trapped

Home Minister promises high level probe into the case

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

Cooperation Minister KN Rajanna on Thursday claimed a honey trap attempt was made on him and 48 politicians across the State. His allegations come shortly after Public Works Minister Satish Jarkiholi claimed that two unsuccessful "honey trap" attempts were made on a senior minister in the State.

During the budget session discussion, Vijayapura MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatnal raised the issue, saying that an attempt had been made to trap the cooperation minister. "This is a bad culture. People's representatives are being blackmailed," he said.

KN Rajanna responded, acknowledging the allegations. "Many people say Karnataka has become a CD and pen drive factory. This is a serious allegation. It is being said that an influential minister from Tumakuru has been caught in a honey trap. The ones from Tumakuru are G Parameshwara and me," Rajanna said in the Legislative Assembly.

Minister KN Rajanna and Satish Jarkiholi — ***PHOTO: ANI***

The minister also claimed that those involved in making CDs and pen drives had honey-trapped 48 people across different political parties. "They belong to two different political parties. This issue is not limited to our state--it extends to the national level.

He further said, "I will file a complaint regarding this. The Home Minister must investigate this matter."

Responding to this in the assembly, Parameshwara said that he will order a high-level investigation into the allegation.

Jarkiholi emphasised that those behind it should be brought to justice and stressed that there was a need for a non-partisan fight against honey trapping.

"In the earlier governments too there were victims of honey trapping. We will take the matter to the Chief Minister."

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar too backed the call for a police complaint in the matter. *—PTI*

BENGALURU'S PRIDE

Bengaluru's Vidhana Soudha gets a colourful makeover with new LED lights. If this trial run is a hit, this is likely to become a weekend affair

PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

ALLAHABAD HC SPARKS OUTRAGE

Groping breast, breaking pyjama string not rape attempt: HC

PRAYAGRAJ, 20 MARCH

In a ruling that may have bigger ramifications, the Allahabad High Court has ruled that mere grabbing of the breast and breaking of the string of a 'pyjama' do not amount to offence of rape but such offence falls under the ambit of assault or use of criminal force against any woman with the intent to disrobe or compel her to be naked.

The order was passed by **Justice Ram Manohar Narayan Mishra** on a revision petition filed by two persons who moved the court, challenging the order of a Special Judge of Kasganj by which the court had summoned them under Section 376 of IPC apart from other sections.

According to facts of the case, on November 10, 2021, she (informant) and the minor daughter were returning home when the three accused, known to the mother offered to take her home. The complainant has alleged that the accused persons stopped their motorcycle on the muddy way to her village and started grabbing her breasts. Akash dragged her and tried to take her beneath the culvert and broke the string of her pyjama. Two persons hearing her cries came to rescue her as the accused fled. The lower court ordered filing an DIR under POCSO Section 18 and IPC Section 376.

PHOTO: PTI

- On 10 November, 2021, the informant and the minor were returning home when the three accused offered to take her home.

"This fact is not sufficient to draw an inference that the accused persons had determined to commit rape on the victim as apart from these facts no other act is attributed to them to further their alleged desire to commit rape on the victim," the court said.

The Court's observation has sparked widespread outrage and calls for the Supreme Court's intervention. People from all sections of society and across the political spectrum have slammed the ruling by Justice Ram Manohar Narayan Mishra. *—PTI*

HC says no to alimony for 'capable' women

Delhi High Court has observed law doesn't promote idling and said qualified women with an earning capacity shouldn't claim interim maintenance from their husbands. Justice Chandra Dhari Singh on March 19 said Section 125 of the CrPC carried the legislative intent to maintain equality among the spouses and provide protection to the wives, children and parents, but didn't promote "idleness" passing an order dismissing a woman's plea against a trial court order denying her interim maintenance from her estranged husband. *—PTI*

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

Elon Musk's social media platform, X, has launched a legal challenge against the Indian government, accusing it of "unlawful content regulation" and "arbitrary censorship".

The lawsuit, filed in the Karnataka High Court, specifically targets the government's interpretation of Section 79(3)(b) of the Information Technology (IT) Act.

X argues that the government's use of this section to block content without following due process violates Supreme Court rulings and undermines free expression online. The platform claims that the government is creating a parallel content-blocking mechanism, bypassing the structured legal process outlined in Section 69A.

Meanwhile, a government source said X may be held responsible for content generated by Grok, and a legal view in this regard will be firmed up soon, . The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) contends that Section 79(3)(b) requires online platforms to remove illegal content when directed by a court order or government notification. However, X disputes this interpretation, stating that the provision does not grant the government independent authority to block content.

Furthermore, X has refused to participate in the government's Sahyog portal, a platform designed to streamline takedown requests under Section 79(3)(b). X claims that the portal acts as a "censorship tool", pressuring platforms to remove content without proper legal review. The lawsuit argues that the government's actions are a direct violation of legal safeguards meant to prevent arbitrary censorship. X is seeking a declaration that the government's interpretation of Section 79(3)(b) is unlawful and that the Sahyog portal is unconstitutional. *—PTI*

30 Naxalites, cop killed in Chhattisgarh

BIJAPUR/KANKER, 20 MARCH

In a fresh offensive against Naxals, security forces killed at least 30 members of the banned CPI (Maoists) in two separate encounters in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region on Thursday, officials said.

While 26 Naxalites were killed in Bijapur district, four Maoists were gunned down in Kanker by a joint team of the BSF and District Reserve Guard (DRG) personnel of the state police. A police jawan was also killed in the encounter in Bijapur, the officials said.

An official said a gunfight broke out around 7 am in a forest along the border of Bijapur and Dantewada districts when a joint team of security personnel was out an anti-Naxalite operation in Gangaloor police station area in Bijapur. The bodies of 26 Naxalites besides firearms and explosives were recovered from the spot, Inspector General of Police, Bastar Range Sundarraj P told PTI. With the latest action, 113 Naxalites have been killed in encounters in the state so far this year. Of them, 97 were eliminated in the Bastar comprising seven districts including Bijapur and Kanker. *—PTI*

The Modi government is moving forward with a ruthless approach against Naxalites and is adopting a zero-tolerance policy against those Naxalites who are not surrendering. The country is going to be Naxal-free by 31 March next year

-Amit Shah, Union Home Minister

Security personnel during an encounter with Naxalites, in Bijapur, Chhattisgarh on Thursday. ***PHOTO: PTI***

Bagepalli man dies by suicide over loan harassment

BAGEPALLI, 20 MARCH

A businessman at Pulavrapalli, near Bagepalli, died by suicide on Thursday after he was harassed by some private moneylenders. Police said the victim, Bhaskar, 55, had borrowed money from money lenders at high interest rates. Four moneylenders went to his shop on Wednesday evening, demanding interest payment, and threatened him with dire consequences, they said. Bhaskar is learnt to have left a note, saying that he was taking the step because he could not withstand harassment. Bagepalli police have registered a case and are further probing. This is the third such incident in the recent past in Chikkaballapur district where private moneylenders and agents of micro finance agencies have been allegedly harassing people and their family members. On 16 March, Manjunath, a resident of M Jalahalli in Gauribidanur taluk, hanged himself over loan harassement.
(Help is available. Please call Tele Manas at 14416, SAHAI at 080-25497777 for support)
—Salar News

Karnataka Bandh not to hit public transport

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

The State transport department has assured that public transport services, including RTC buses, will operate as usual during the statewide bandh on 22 March. The shutdown has been called by Kannada Okkoota, a coalition of pro-Kannada groups, and the Transport Employees' Union to protest the alleged attacks on Kannadigas in Belagavi. A senior KSRTC official told **Salar News**, "We have been directed to continue operations unless any untoward incident occurs." The department has also instructed all four road transport corporations to ensure smooth travel, especially for students appearing in SSLC exams.
—Salar News

Strict measures for smooth conduct of SSLC exams

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

Authorities are implementing stringent measure to ensure the smooth and fair conduct of class 10 Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examinations in Karnataka beginning on Friday ending 4 April. A total of 8,96,447 students will be taking the exams in 2818 centres. The Department of Primary and Sec-ondary Education, along with the Karnataka Examinations Authority, has said webcasting will be con-ducted at examination centres to curb malpractice, while prohibitory orders will be enforced within a 200-metre radius of exam centres and all computer centres in the area will remain closed. All examina-tion centres will be equipped with CCTV cameras and webcasting facilities. The transportation of ques-tion papers to the centres will be videographed to prevent paper leaks, authorities added. *—Salar News*

Rangayana to hold theatre fest from Saturday

MYSURU, 20 MARCH

Rangayana Mysuru, in association with Mysuru District Amateur Theatre Artists Forum, will organise a series events, including theatre festival, seminars, folk events and Rangageethegalu, from 22–27 March on its premises in Mysuru, its director Satish Tiptur said on Thursday. The event is organized with the support of Karnataka Nataka and Sahitya Academy. Tiptur said the organisation's Kannada and Culture Director KM Gayathri will inaugurate the event on 22 March at 6pm at Bhoomigeetha on Rangayana premises in presence of MLA K Harishgowda.
The six-day event will conclude with World Theatre day celebrations on 27 March at 6 pm.
—Salar News

Witness safety, long trials delay justice in rape cases

1,461 rape cases were registered between 2023 and 2025

HAMEED ASHRAF
BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

Karnataka saw zero convictions in rape cases even though 1,461 rape cases were registered between 2023 and 2025. One of the main reasons of such low conviction is the lengthy trail that leads to mental traumas in the victims and a weak witness protection programme.

Women's rights activist Pramila Nesargi told **Salar News** that no woman wants to relive the distressing incidents. "Rape trials stretch for years, sometimes even decades. A victim cannot repeatedly narrate her ordeal without emotional strain," she said. She added that in molestation cases, the accused often walk free or cases remain pending for years.

Advocate Syed Akmal Rizvi from Bengaluru told Salar News, "For the police and lawyers, it is just another case. But for the victim, it is a battle for dignity. Despite laws protecting their identity, victims fear stigma, and lengthy trials make their suffering worse."

He said to overcome this the government must establish one-stop support centres to provide medical care, psychological counselling, and legal assistance to survivors.

He said many cases go unreported, and a few cases are dropped as they are false accusations. "A 23-year-old man claimed his relationship with his live-in partner was consensual, but the woman's parents filed a rape case against him.

Victims fear stigma, avoid trials despite identity protection laws ***PHOTO: PTI***

2023	2024	2025
Registered cases 601	Registered cases 601	Registered cases 124
Convictions 0	Convictions 0	Convictions 0
Cases pending 446	Cases pending 461	Cases pending 2
Cases closed 33	Cases closed 7	Cases closed 0

SALAR EXCLUSIVE

False cases, out-of-court settlements, and lack of proper investigation are the main causes of injustice," he added.

Women's rights activist Brinda Adige told **Salar News** that caste plays a big role in rape cases.

"The first question the judge and prosecution ask are, 'Who has raped whom?' There is an underlying assumption that if the victim belongs to a so-called lower caste, the crime is somehow less serious, leaving the victim at the mercy of public opinion rather than the justice system. The same bias applies when considering the religion of the victim and the accused," she told **Salar News**.

Meanwhile, former DG & IGP ST Ramesh said an exclusive witness protection law is needed to prevent coercion and bribery. He blamed an insufficient number of judges and courts, lengthy legal procedures, and frequent adjournments for delays in case hearings.

"False testimonies lead to the accused going unpunished. Many cases take three to five years to come up for trial, by which time witnesses forget crucial details, leading to inconsistencies in their testimonies. This allows accused to secure acquittals," Ramesh added. *—Salar News*

PAID IN CRYPTO

BEL engineer held for leaking defence secrets to Pak

BENGALURU 20 MARCH

A senior engineer from Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) was arrested by intelligence agencies for allegedly leaking classified defence information to Pakistan in Bengaluru on Thursday.

The accused, Deep Raj Chandra, 36, worked at BEL's Product Development and Innovation Centre and lived in Mathikere. Originally from Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad, Chandra had access to critical defence-related data due to his role at the defence Public Sector Undertaking.

Investigators revealed that Chandra used an encrypted email system, where he saved classified information in draft emails instead of sending them directly. He then shared login credentials with his handlers in Pakistan, allowing them to access the data, which helped him evade detection, sources said.

"Preliminary investigations suggest he was receiving cryptocurrency payments from a suspected Pakistani Intelligence Operative (PIO)," a senior intelligence officer told Salar News.

Leaked data on radars, security ops

BEL, a key manufacturer of

Deep Raj Chandra ***PHOTO: SALAR***

advanced electronic and radar systems for India's armed forces, launched an internal probe after receiving alerts from Military Intelligence. The investigation found that Chandra allegedly leaked data related to communication and radar systems, security protocols within BEL, and operating and production systems.

Authorities have seized Chandra's laptop and mobile phone, which are being sent to the Ministry of Defence's Cloud Investigation and Response Automation (CIRA) laboratory for forensic analysis. Chandra is now in custody under the Official Secrets Act. *—Salar News*

Banks to delete UPI IDs linked to inactive numbers

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

From 1 April onwards, banks and payment service providers will suspend Unified Payments Interface (UPI) services linked to inactive or reassigned mobile numbers. The move, initiated by the National Payments Corporation of India, aims to prevent fraudulent and unauthorised transactions arising from mobile number churn.

With Bengaluru being one of India's top digital transaction hubs, the risk of fraud linked to inactive mobile numbers has become a growing concern.

When users change or deactivate their phone numbers, the linked UPI accounts often remain active, making them vulnerable to misuse. Fraudsters could exploit these dormant links to gain unauthorised access to bank accounts. To counter this, banks and PSPs will delink inactive numbers from the UPI ecosystem.

The banks will notify affected users before deactivation of their UPI services. Bengaluru's fintech ecosystem, including digital-first businesses, must adapt swiftly to avoid transaction failures.

As the city moves closer to becoming a cashless economy, keeping banking credentials updated is crucial for uninterrupted digital payments.

How to keep caution

The users should check if their mobile number is active by making a call, sending a message or verifying receipt of the bank's OTPs and SMS alerts. They can also update their UPI-linked phone number via net banking, UPI apps or by visiting a bank branch.

Businesses, freelancers and merchants, who rely on UPI transactions, must ensure that their registered mobile numbers remain valid to avoid payment disruptions. *—Salar News*

K'taka delaying land for B'luru rail: Vaishnaw

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

The Indian Railways has transferred land to K-RIDE Limited for the Bengaluru Suburban Rail Project, but Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw highlighted that the parallel transfer of land from the Karnataka state government is progressing at a sluggish pace. Responding to BJP MP Tejasvi Surya in the Lok Sabha, Vaishnaw noted that the current part-time Managing Director, appointed by the state, lacks the requisite expertise in railway technology and a full-time MD is necessary for the project.

Ashwini Vaishnaw. ***PHOTO: PTI***

The Bengaluru Suburban Rail Project (BSRP), encompassing 148.17 km and sanctioned at a cost of Rs 15,767 crore, relies on a 20 per cent contribution from both the Centre and the state, with the remainder financed through debt. The project comprises four corridors, including KSR Bengaluru City–Devanahalli and Baiyyapanahalli–Chikkabanawara, with ongoing work evident in Corridors 2 and 4.

Vaishnaw underlined that while nine joint venture companies exist for state and central collaboration, slow land acquisition remains a significant hurdle for the project's timely progression. *—PTI*

Bidar GP members spar over ₹24L funds, cops called

- The argument began when Manik Hipparagi, senior Gram Panchayat member and former Panchayat president, demanded the release of approximately Rs 24 lakh for various works carried out during his tenure

CHITTAGUPPA, 20 MARCH

A heated argument erupted in Belakera Gram Panchayat, Bidar, on Wednesday over the release of Rs 24 lakh, necessitating a police intervention.

The argument began when Manik Hipparagi, senior Gram Panchayat member and former Panchayat president, demanded the release of approximately Rs 24 lakh for various works carried out during his tenure. The Gram Panchayat's in-charge Development Officer Bhagyajyoti, however, said no white paper, including bills and receipts were provided.

"The PDO has colluded with some people to loot funds and is deliberately withholding back the money," Manik told **Salar News**. "I demand an investigation into all works executed during the PDO's tenure. If senior officials do not take action within two days, I will protest."

Bhagyajyoti reiterated the necessity for white paper. "I have repeatedly asked member Manik to provide the necessary documents, but he has failed to submit them," she told **Salar News**. "How can funds be released without proper documentation?"

Salar News could not verify what the funds were allegedly used for. Bhagyajyoti claimed that Manik had used objectionable language against women. "During the meeting, he used inappropriate language against me. He even stood outside the Panchayat office and used offensive words without considering the presence of women members," she said. Manik said, "They disrespected me as a senior member by calling the police to the Panchayat. This is an insult to me and our Panchayat." *—Salar News*

DKS MAKES MOVES!

DyCM DK Shivakumar during the inauguration of 2nd Namma Bengaluru International Grand masters Open Chess Tournament 2025, at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru on Thursday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

3kg cocaine seized from Ghanaian at KIA

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence seized over 3 kg of cocaine from a Ghanaian national at Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) in Bengaluru, officials said on Thursday.

"The DRI seized 3.186 kg of cocaine from a Ghanaian national at Bengaluru Airport; 1 arrested," the DRI said on its website. The identity of the Ghanaian woman arrested in this regard on March 18 or the value of the seized cocaine is not known. On 3 March, the DRI seized 142 kg of foreign-origin gold bars worth Rs 12.56 crore from Kannada actress Harshavardhini Ranya alias Ranya Rao at KIA. Rao is the stepdaughter of senior IPS officer Ramachandra Rao. He is the Chairman and Managing Director of the Karnataka State Police Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd.

Following this, officials conducted a search at her home, leading to the seizure of gold jewellery worth Rs 2.06 crore and cash amounting to Rs 2.67 crore. *—PTI*

M'luru student beaten for negative Google review of PG

MANGALURU, 20 MARCH

An 18-year-old engineering student was allegedly assaulted by a group of five individuals, including the owner of a boys' PG (paying guest) accommodation here, police said on Thursday.

The incident occurred under the jurisdiction of the Kadri police station on 17 March around 10.30pm, they said. According to the complaint filed, Vikas, a native of Kalaburagi, had been staying at the PG accommodation for the past six months before shifting to another place. He had posted a negative review on Google, giving the PG a single-star rating and highlighting issues such as the presence of insects in the food, poor hygiene, and unclean toilets. Following the review, the PG owner, Santosh, allegedly threatened Vikas and demanded that he delete the comment. When Vikas refused, Santosh, along with four others, allegedly assaulted him and forced him to remove the review. *—PTI*

SPIRITUALITY OR SPECTACLE?

Bengalureans fume as HC allows Cauvery Aarti at Sankey Tank

BENGALURU, 20 MARCH

High Court permitted the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) to conduct Cauvery Aarti at Sankey Tank on Friday. The Court on Thursday dismissed a petition that sought to halt the event.

It instructed authorities to ensure public order is maintained and regulations protecting water bodies are followed. The government assured the court that there would be no food stalls. Geetha Misra, who filed a public interest litigation against the event, told **Salar News**, "It is disheartening to see support for such events. Aren't we responsible for preserving lakes? What are we giving back to nature, and how are those in power allowing such activities?". Following court's ruling, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said that it is a government-led initiative and not politically motivated.

However, the decision has sparked criticism from activists and residents who told **Salar News** that the event will only harm the lake's already fragile ecosystem. Longtime resident Sreenivasan questioned the event's relevance.

"Sankey is a 150-year-old man-made lake, while Vrishabhavathi is an ancient river. There is no link between them," he said. According to the BWSSB, Sankey Tank was chosen for the Cauvery aarti as it is considered the birthplace of the Vrishabhavathi river, a tributary of Cauvery.

Lake conservationist Arvind Malligavad said large gatherings could lead to pollution. Malleswaram resident Preeti Sunderajan argued that resources should be spent on cleaning the polluted Cauvery River instead of hosting this event. Karnataka Tank Conservation and Development Authority, responsible for protecting lakes, granted permission for the event—despite Section 12 of the KTCDA Act prohibiting lakes from being used for such events.

The permission letter dated 17 March bans activities harmful to the lake, such as food dumping and loudspeakers without approval from the Pollution Control Board. However, the event still includes rituals, a grand procession, a laser show, and an orchestra with over 10,000 attendees. Attendees will receive water from Bhagamandala, where the Cauvery meets two other rivers, as 'prasada'.

Sankey Tank, has always been known as a haven for bats and birds. Especially the large colonies of bats and bird species like kingfishers, herons, and migratory birds. *—Salar News*

Sankey Tank has always been known as a haven for bats and birds ***PHOTO: BANGALORETOURISM***

Delhi MLAs protest, halt demolition of 3 temple

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

A planned demolition of three temples in Mayur Vihar, mandated by the Delhi High Court, was halted on Thursday following a protest led by local MLA Ravinder Singh Negi. A team from the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), supported by police, arrived around 4am to demolish Kali Mandir, Amarnath Mandir, and Badrinath Mandir, which were reportedly constructed in a designated green belt area. Negi stated that he and supporters had been present since 3am to safeguard the temples. A DDA spokesperson confirmed the postponement, citing public outrage, and said their legal team is reviewing the situation. *—PTI*

M'rashtra repeat cow offenders to be hit with MCOCA

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

The Maharashtra government is set to implement the stringent Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) against repeat offenders involved in cow slaughter and trafficking. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis announced this initiative during a legislative assembly session in response to concerns raised by Sangram Jagtap of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) regarding a specific case involving Atiq Qureshi, an accused with multiple charges. Pankaj Bhoyar, the Minister of State for Home (Rural), confirmed that Qureshi faces 20 cases related to cow trafficking in Ahilyanagar and was released on bail after being arrested in January. Fadnavis stated that police would be instructed to pursue MCOCA charges against individuals repeatedly violating these laws, marking a significant escalation in the state's efforts to combat organised crime related to cattle trafficking. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Rahul given notice for 'controversial' remarks

SAMBHAL, 20 MARCH

A local court has summoned Congress leader Rahul Gandhi to respond or appear in court on 4 April 2025 regarding a complaint related to his alleged remarks. Additional District Judge Nirbhay Narayan Singh acted on a petition filed by Simran Gupta, national president of the Hindu Shakti Dal. Gupta claimed that during the inauguration of the Delhi Congress office on 15 January, Gandhi stated, "Our fight is not against BJP or RSS, but against the Indian state," which he argued hurt public sentiments. Advocate Sachin Goyal stated that the court accepted the complaint. Following a lack of response to earlier complaints lodged with local authorities, Gupta escalated the matter to the court on 23 January. *—PTI*

'Modi-Dhami': Free Eid food in U'khand

DEHRADUN, 20 MARCH

The Uttarakhand Waqf Board has announced a plan to provide free food kits to underprivileged Muslims in the state for Eid, named the 'Modi-Dhami' kit. The package will include two litres of milk, two kgs of rice, one kgs of sugar, a packet of vermicelli, and dry fruits, as stated by board chairman Shadab Shams. Additionally, children will receive free clothing as part of the initiative. To address encroachments on Waqf properties, a temporary state-level Waqf Tribunal will be established by month's end. The board also plans to increase rental fees for commercial tenants, aiming to better utilise funds for the welfare of the poor. Stern actions will be taken post-Eid against illegal occupiers of Waqf properties. *—PTI*

Govt approves Rs 54,000 cr deal for Army, Navy and Air Force

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

India on Thursday approved capital acquisition of a plethora of military hardware worth over Rs 54,000 crore that includes airborne early warning and control aircraft systems, torpedos and engines for T-90 tanks at a total cost of over Rs 54000 crore. In a significant move, the DAC also approved the guidelines for reducing the timelines at various stages of the capital acquisition process.

The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi also approved a mega deal to procure advanced towed artillery gun system (ATAGS) for the Indian Army at a cost of Rs 7,000 crore, marking a major step in indigenous manufacturing of such howitzers.

The ATAGS is the first indigenously designed, developed, and manufactured 155mm artillery gun system and its procurement is set to enhance the operational capabilities of the Indian Army and modernise it.

The gun system features a long 52-calibre barrel, allowing for extended strike range of up to 45km.

The defence acquisition council had accorded the initial approval to the procurement around two years ago. Under the deal, a total of 307 guns will be procured along with 327 gun-towing vehicles.

The deployment of the gun system along India's western (Pakistan) and northern (China) borders will provide the armed forces with a significant strategic edge, ensuring enhanced operational readiness and firepower, the sources said. A testament to the 'Make in India' initiative, ATAGS has been developed through collaboration between the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Indian private industry partners. *—PTI*

The government further approved a Rs 7,000 crore deal ATAGS artillery **PHOTO: X/DRDO**

Parl adjourned over T-shirt protest

LS Speaker invokes rule 349 to call off session over improper dress code

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

DMK members wore T-shirts with slogans written on them into the Parliament, sparking a massive row which led to the adjourned of both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha on Thursday.

The Rajya Sabha was adjourned three times before finally being called off, without any transacting of business. The Lok Sabha too witnessed multiple adjournments before ending.

Some of the DMK MPs attended the House proceedings wearing T-shirts with the slogan "Delimitation - Tamil Nadu will fight, Tamil Nadu will win", which was objected to by the Chair. Some MPs also donned stoles that played upon Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's remarks on DMK MPs' protest in Lok Sabha against the three-language formula of National Education Policy and had the word "uncivilised" written on it, with the first two alphabets 'U' and 'N' having been crossed.

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar called the adjournment after allowing some laying of papers and some reports. He called for a meeting with the leaders of political parties where he sought their cooperation and urged the DMK members to change their attire. He said that T-shirts were against the rules.

Tamil Nadu MPs wearing t-shirts with the slogan, 'Fair Delimitation, Tamil Nadu will fight, Tamil Nadu will win' in New Delhi **PHOTO: PTI**

In response, Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla invoked Rule 349 to request members to change.

"House functions with rules and procedures. Members have to maintain the dignity and honour of the House. But some MPs are not following the rules and violating the dignity," Birla said, citing Rule 349 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the House of the People.

Rule 349(xvi) says: "Whilst the House is sitting, a member shall not display flags, emblems or any exhibits in the House."

"However big a leader is, such undignified attire is not acceptable inside the House. Go outside, change your clothes and come back with a proper dress," he said.

Opposition MPs, however, noted that BJP leaders have previously come to the House wearing their party symbol, and had previously chanted religious phrases like "Jai Shri Ram". *—PTI*

25 INDIANS AWARDED DEATH SENTENCE IN UAE

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

The number of Indian nationals who have been awarded a death sentence in the UAE stands at 25, but the judgement is yet to be implemented, Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh said. When asked whether any Indian has been executed or given capital punishment in foreign countries in the last five years the minister said such deaths were carried out in Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. *—PTI*

22 SC JUDGES APPOINTED IN HC SINCE 2018

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Out of the 715 high court judges appointed since 2018, 22 belong to the Scheduled Caste category, 16 to the Scheduled Tribe category, 89 to the Other Backward Classes category and 37 to the minorities. Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal also said that there was no for reservation for any caste. *—PTI*

NATIONAL INTEREST PARAMOUNT IN OIL

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

India's decision on international oil purchases is based on diverse factors, with the country's national interests at the top. MEA Minister of State Kirti Vardhan Singh admitted that the ministry was informed by the US about its 14 January sanctions imposed on more than 400 Russian energy sector-related entities. *—PTI*

BJP protests erupt in Bengal amid vandalism

KOLKATA, 20 MARCH

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) staged widespread protests across West Bengal on Thursday, a day after the vehicle of Leader of the Opposition, Suvendu Adhikari, was vandalised in Baruipur, allegedly by supporters of the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Demonstrations on major roads in Salt Lake, Chuchura, and Tamluk led to significant traffic disruptions, prompting police intervention.

Earlier, BJP MLAs walked out of the Assembly, accusing Speaker Biman Banerjee of bias and claiming that democracy was being undermined. Some BJP members even tore assembly documents in protest and burnt an effigy of the Speaker outside the assembly premises. Adhikari alleged that TMC supporters attacked his vehicle while he was attending a rally, raising concerns over safety and fair elections. TMC vice-president Jaiprakash Majumdar dismissed Adhikari's claims, asserting that the BJP would face defeat in upcoming elections.

In response to the unrest, Adhikari announced plans for a fresh demonstration on 27 March. *—PTI*

CONSENT REQUIRED FOR SEARCH

Madras HC grants TASMAC temporary relief from ED raids

CHENNAI, 20 MARCH

In a significant reprieve for the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC), the Madras High Court has instructed the Enforcement Directorate (ED) not to proceed with actions following recent searches at the liquor retailer's headquarters.

The ruling came during a hearing where the court requested that the ED produce copies of the First Information Report (FIR) and Enforcement Case Information Report (ECIR) it relied upon during its investigations.

The ED has alleged irregularities amounting to approximately Rs 1,000 crore, linked to practices such as manipulation in tender processes and unaccounted cash transactions.

A division bench, comprising Justices M.S. Ramesh and N. Senthilkumar, scheduled

further proceedings for 25 March. TASMAC's petition contends that the ED's actions violate federalism and requests protection for its employees from what it describes as harassment under the guise of investigation.

Advocate General PS Raman argued that the ED requires state consent for searches, a claim criticized by Senior Counsel Vikram Choudhry, who described the raids as an invasion of privacy. The ED maintains that its actions were justified due to evidence of money laundering activities. *—PTI*

Kerala assembly adjourned over anganwandi row

T'PURAM, 20 MARCH

The Kerala Assembly was marked by intense debate on Thursday as the opposition Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) staged a walkout in response to ongoing protests by Anganwadi workers demanding higher remuneration and better benefits.

The clash was ignited by an adjournment motion concerning the workers' agitation, with Industries and Law Minister P Rajeeve defending the state's support for Anganwadi employees.

Indian Union Muslim League MLA Najeeb Kanthapuram condemned the government for neglecting the plight of both Anganwadi and Accredited Social Health Activists.

Leader of the Opposition VD Satheesan further accused the ruling party of failing to address their grievances of workers.

The uproar culminated in a walkout by UDF members, who accused the government of overburdening employees while failing to acknowledge their struggles. *—PTI*

WHEN IN ROME

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon plays cricket at Wankede Stadium, in Mumbai **PHOTO: PTI**

'Taiwan can help reduce deficit with China': DNSA Hsu

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Taiwan's Deputy National Security Adviser, Hsu Szu-Chien, emphasised the potential for Taiwan to assist India in reducing its dependency on Chinese electronic components, proposing a free trade agreement as a key step forward. In an exclusive interview, Hsu highlighted that a trade deal could enhance Taiwanese investment in Indian sectors like semiconductors and other high-technology fields, helping to mitigate the "high tariff" barriers currently in place.

Hsu noted the synergy between Taiwan's advanced technology and India's youthful demographic could significantly bolster the production of high-end tech components within India, thereby decreasing imports from Chin. With Taiwan producing around 70 per cent of the world's semiconductors, Hsu shared hopes for renewed momentum towards an FTA. Although India and Taiwan lack formal diplomatic ties, their bilateral trade relations have seen significant growth. *—PTI*

GOVT PEGS COST AT RS 54 CR

Amid 70K cr debt, T'gana to spend Rs 200 cr on Miss World?

HYDERABAD, 20 MARCH

Telangana Tourism Minister Jupally Krishna Rao said on Thursday that the 72nd edition of the Miss World contest will be held across various culturally significant venues in Telangana--including Hyderabad from 10 -31 May, at an alleged cost of Rs 54 crore. "This cost will be equally shared between the Telangana Tourism Department and Miss World Limited and Telangana's contribution of Rs 27 crore will primarily come from sponsorships" the minister stated at a press conference organised to announce the pageant.

Media reports have speculated that the event may cost around Rs 200 crore, prompting opposition parties to question such a large expenditure on a beauty pageant, especially when the state faces a revenue shortfall of Rs 71,000 crore.

Miss World 2024 Krystyna Pyszkova during a pre-event of the 72nd Miss World pageant, in Hyderabad, 19 March **PHOTO: PTI**

Addressing the opposition's accusation of "misplaced financial priorities", the minister assured that the Miss World pageant would also boost Telangana's economy and would be a good platform to showcase Telangana's culture boosting tourism. Rao, citing the globally successful South Korean television series 'Squid Game' as well as the immensely popular band 'BTS'. *—PTI*

Trump hopes India will reduce tariffs in April

NEW YORK, 20 MARCH

President Donald Trump has expressed optimism that India will reduce its tariffs on American goods, while simultaneously reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs on the nation starting 2 April. In an interview with Breitbart News, Trump highlighted his "very good relationship" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi but voiced concerns over India's high tariff rates.

"The only problem I have with India is they're one of the highest tariffing nations in the world," Trump stated. He expressed belief that substantial tariff reductions from India are on the horizon but warned, "On 2 April , we will be charging them the same tariffs they charge us."

"We have a powerful group of partners in trade," Trump said. "We can't let those partners treat us badly, however, we do better in many ways frankly with our foes than we do with our friends." *—PTI*

Aaditya says Disha Salian death used to tarnish image

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

The Disha Salian death controversy erupted in the Maharashtra legislature on Thursday, with members of the ruling BJP-led Mahayuti alliance demanding answers about the case. Ameet Satam, a BJP MLA, raised concerns over the lack of progress in an ongoing special investigation team (SIT) probe, following allegations from Salian's father, Satish Salian, who has requested a fresh inquiry into his daughter's death.

Disha Salian, former manager of late Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput, died on 8 June 2020 after falling from a building. Initially deemed a suicide, speculation surrounding the circumstances of her death has persisted. Satish Salian alleges that his daughter may have been gang-raped and murdered, and he has called for a First Information Report (FIR) against Aaditya Thackeray, who served as a minister in the previous MVA government.

Amidst the heated exchange, Thackeray said these were attempts to tarnish his image and stated he would respond to the allegations in court.

Aaditya Thackeray **PHOTO: PTI**

- Disha Salian, former manager of late Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput, died on 8 June 2020 after falling from a building

Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray denied any link between his son Aaditya and Salian's death. "Every time this issue is raised in the session. There is no substance. If you want to make untrue things true, it will boomerang on you," *—PTI*

Delhi Airport: All T2 flights to shift to T1 from 15 April

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Delhi Airport's Terminal 1 (T1) will resume full operations from 15 April onwards. As part of this transition, all flights currently operating from Terminal 2 (T2) will be relocated to T1, according to an official release. Currently, Terminal 2 handles approximately 270-280 air traffic movements daily, serving over 46,000 passengers, primarily from Akasa Air and IndiGo. These flights will be shifted to T1 starting 15 April. The Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL) has notified the airlines about the change and requested them to plan accordingly for the transition. —*ANI*

PHOTO: INSTA

Actor Lisa claims AI denied medical waiver for father

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

"Where's the empathy," asked actor-model Lisa Ray after Air India "denied" her a waiver when she had to change her travel plans due to her 92-year-old father's ill health. In its response, Air India said Ray's claim that the airline didn't display empathy for her unwell father is "unfounded". Ray, known for starring in movies such as "Kasoor", "Water" and "Bollywood/ Hollywood", tagged the air carrier in a post on X on Wednesday. According to the airline, Ray had purchased the ticket from "a travel agent and had first reached out to the travel agent, and not to Air India". Air India team reached out to her and offered a free date change or a one-year period to utilise the tickets for future travel. She declined the offer and requested for a full refund of her ticket, instead," the spokesperson said.—*PTI*

Rabid dog attacks 30 in Kerala's Kannur

KANNUR, 20 MARCH

A rabid dog attacked 30 people, including children, in Iriveri and nearby areas of this district on Thursday, health officials said. Many victims sought treatment at the district hospital. One person has been admitted to the hospital, while two others with vaccine allergies have been referred to the medical college. A team led by District Medical Officer Dr Piyush M Namboothiripad visited the district hospital to check on those injured in the attack. The DMO assured that all necessary treatments were being provided and that there was an adequate supply of anti-rabies vaccines in the district. "All those who sought treatment have been given the vaccine. There is no cause for concern," the DMO said in a statement. —*PTI*

PHOTO: INSTA

Chahal and Dhanashree Verma granted divorce

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

Cricketer Yuzvendra Chahal and his estranged wife, Dhanashree Verma, have received a divorce by mutual consent from a family court in Bandra. The couple, who married in December 2020 and separated in June 2022, filed a joint petition on 5 February for their divorce. Their request for an expedited decision was made to accommodate Chahal's impending participation in the Indian Premier League, starting on 22 March, where he is part of the Punjab Kings team. The Bombay High Court waived the usual six-month cooling-off period under the Hindu Marriage Act, stating that both parties had complied with the consent terms. Previously, a family court refused to waive this period due to partial compliance regarding alimony payments, but the High Court concluded otherwise. —*PTI*

Haryana clears farmers' protest site after 13 months

Farmers announce protests against crackdown

CHANDIGARH, 20 MARCH

A backhoe loader being used to dismantle temporary structures set up by agitating farmers during an eviction drive by the Punjab police at Shambhu border, in Patiala district **PHOTO: PTI**

Following the eviction of protesting farmers from the Shambhu and Khanauri border points, Haryana security personnel commenced the removal of concrete barricades that were erected to prevent farmers from Punjab from advancing to Delhi. Heavy machinery, including JCBs, was deployed at these borders to clear the Shambhu-Ambala and Sangrur-Jind roads, which had remained closed for over a year due to the farmers' protests.

The barricades, fortified with cement blocks, iron nails and barbed wire, were established to thwart the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march. Meanwhile, Punjab Police resumed efforts to dismantle temporary structures remaining on the Punjab side of the borders.

Patiala Senior Superintendent of Police, Nanak Singh, confirmed that all trolleys and semi-permanent structures would be cleared within hours, while Haryana officials synchronised actions to restore road traffic. Inspector General of Police (Ambala Range), Sibash Kabiraj, indicated that barricades on the Haryana side would be removed by Thursday evening.

In response, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha announced protests outside deputy commissioners' offices to condemn the police action and the handling of the situation by the Aam Aadmi Party government in Punjab. Farmers, including key leaders who were detained after a meeting with a central delegation, expressed their outrage over the crackdown, asserting their right to protest for demands related to the Centre.

Punjab Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema stressed the need for employment generation and industry revival in the state while urging farmers not to disrupt the region's economic stability. —*PTI*

Nagpur violenec: Curfew lifted partially after 3 days

NAGPUR, 20 MARCH

Amid demand that Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's tomb at Sambhajinagar be removed, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has put up tin sheets on two sides of the 18th century structure **PHOTO: ANI**

Curfew was lifted or relaxed in some areas of Nagpur on Thursday, three days after violence rocked the city, officials said.

Violent mobs went on a rampage in central Nagpur areas on Monday night amid rumours that a 'chadar' with holy inscriptions was burnt during protests led by VHP and Bajrang Dal for the removal of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's tomb located in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar district.

Subsequently, curfew was imposed in Kotwali, Ganeshpeth, Tehsil, Lakadganj, Pachpaoli, Shanti Nagar, Sakkardara, Nandanvan, Imambada, Yashodhara Nagar and Kapil Nagar police station areas.

Besides, Singal ordered for the relaxation of curfew in Lakadganj, Pachpaoli, Shantinagar, Sakkardara and Imambada areas from 2 pm to 4 pm to allow the people to venture out to buy the essential items of daily need.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra police's cyber cell said that one of the accused Fahim Khan "edited and circulated videos" and "glorified violence" on social media, which led to the riots spreading in various parts of the city.

The cyber police have booked Khan and five others on charges of sedition and spreading misinformation on social media during the unrest here.

Khan a leader of the Minorities Democratic Party was arrested on 19 March and he has been remanded in custody till 21 March.

Cyber department has also identified more than 140 posts and videos containing objectionable contents online aimed at inciting communal unrest. 18 teams have been formed to track down those involved in the violence.—*PTI*

After 7 months, RG Kar victim's parents get death certificate

KOLKATA, 20 MARCH

PHOTO: PTI

Seven months after their daughter's tragic rape-murder at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, her parents have finally received her death certificate from the West Bengal Health Secretary, NS Nigam.

On Wednesday evening, Nigam, accompanied by the medical superintendent and vice-principal of RG Kar hospital, visited the victim's home to personally deliver the original death certificate to her parents.

"They needed the original death certificate. Today, I came here and handed it over to them. No discussions were held," Nigam stated. The father of the victim, who had been seeking the document since 9 August—the day of the incident at the state-run institution—said, "The health secretary suddenly arrived at our residence and gave us the original document."

He recounted their struggles to obtain it, mentioning they had sent an email in January but faced repeated obstacles, moving from one department to another without support. He also confirmed receiving a link to download a copy of the certificate later.

The 31-year-old postgraduate trainee was discovered dead in a seminar hall in RG Kar hospital. —*PTI*

MF Husain's artwork fetches record ₹118 crore at auction

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Painted in 1954, the artwork remained unseen until now **PHOTO: X**

Iconic painter MF Husain's monumental work 'Untitled (Gram Yatra)' achieved a remarkable Rs 118 crore at a recent auction, establishing a new benchmark for modern Indian art. The auction, held by Christie's in New York on 19 March, nearly doubles the previous record set by Amrita Sher-Gil's 'The Story Teller', which sold for approximately Rs 61.8 crore in Mumbai earlier this year.

'Gram Yatra', meaning 'village pilgrimage', consists of 13 distinct panels spanning nearly 14 feet, and is praised as a seminal piece reflecting the vibrancy and diversity of a newly independent India. Painted in 1954, the artwork left India that same year and remained largely unseen until now. It was acquired by Ukrainian-born, Norway-based Dr Leon Elias Volodarsky, who originally obtained it while in Delhi. In 1964, Volodarsky bequeathed the painting to Oslo University Hospital, with proceeds from the sale earmarked to support future generations of doctors at the institution. —*PTI*

SITUATION IN CHURACHANDPUR STILL TENSE

IMPHAL/ CHURACHANDPUR, 20 MARCH

Vehicles stayed off the roads, school and office attendance was thin and security forces patrolled Manipur's curfew-bound Churachandpur district on Thursday, two days after clashes between the Hmar and Zomi communities that claimed a life and left several injured, police said.

At least one person, 51-year-old Lalropui Pakhuangte from the Hmar community, was killed in Tuesday night's clashes. The clashes between the two tribes started after Hmar Inpui general secretary Richard Hmar was attacked by some Zomi people on Sunday, leading to violence and imposition of curfew in the district next day. —*PTI*

UP murder: Girl tells neighbours, 'Papa is in drum'

MEERUT, 20 MARCH

The accused Sahil Shukla, Mukan Rastogi **PHOTO: PTI**

New revelations have emerged in the Saurabh Rajput murder case, with the deceased's family said that that Saurabh's six-year-old daughter knew about her father's death.

"That is why, as we have come to know from some people, she (Saurabh's daughter) was saying, 'Papa is in the drum'," Renu Devi, Saurabh's mother said.

However, SP City Ayush Vikram Singh dismissed this claim, stating, "When the wife Muskan Rastogi was telling the story of the incident to the family members, the girl might have been present there. The girl did not know anything (beforehand) about this."

According to police sources, Muskan went to her family on 18 March and informed her parents about the murder. The parents then took her to the police. Following this, a case was registered, the body was recovered, and Muskan and her lover Sahil Shukla were arrested.

Renu said Rastogi's parents were also aware of Saurabh's murder well before 18 March, when the police were officially informed about the crime.

She has refuted Muskan's parents' claims of ignorance regarding the murder, accusing them of attempting to mislead the police.

According to police, Muskan, Sahil confessed to having stabbed Saurabh to death on 4 March. The two then chopped up his body, put the remains inside a drum and sealed it with cement.

The two were arrested on Tuesday.

SP City Singh confirmed that Muskan had been planning Saurabh's murder since November 2023. —*Agencies*

UP: Mosque, 33 houses get illegal construction notice

SAMBHAL, 20 MARCH

A mosque and 33 houses have been sent notices alleging illegal construction on municipal land in Waris Nagar area of Chandausi here, authorities said on Thursday.

The action follows a complaint lodged on Samadhan Diwas, which prompted a site inspection by the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police on Monday.

"The Sambhal District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police resolved the complaint of illegal occupation of the Nagar Palika Parishad's Gata number 348 land, which they also inspected," Chandausi Tehsildar Dhirendra Pratap Singh said.

Residents claimed they had purchased the land legally and possess the deeds.

"The revenue team has collected all those deeds to see whether they are legal," Singh said. —*PTI*

Workers whitewash the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid, in Sambhal district, Uttar Pradesh **PHOTO: PTI**

Sambhal's Shahi Jama Masjid whitewashing to conclude

SAMBHAL, 20 MARCH

The renovation project at the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal is expected to be completed on Thursday, following a high court order that mandated the work to commence earlier this week. Masood Farooqui, secretary of the mosque committee, expressed confidence that the whitewashing and painting would meet the one-week deadline set by the Allahabad High Court.

The renovation, overseen by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), began on Sunday in response to the court's directive.

Concerns regarding the colour change on the mosque's rear, which has transitioned from green and gold to white, were addressed by Shahi Jama Masjid President Zafar Ali. The mosque's renovation follows ongoing legal disputes over its history, linked to claims it was built on an ancient Hindu temple. Tensions flared in November during protests against an ASI survey, resulting in violence that left four dead and several police injured. —*PTI*

'CONTRIBUTES TO ADDICTION'

Betting app promotion: Prakash Raj, Rana, Vijay Deverakonda booked

Prakash Raj, Rana Daggubati & Vijay Deverakonda

HYDERABAD, 20 MARCH

A case has been registered against six prominent Telugu film actors, including Rana Daggubati, Prakash Raj, and Vijay Deverakonda, along with 19 social media influencers, for allegedly promoting illegal betting applications. The complaint was filed at Miyapur Police Station, where a police officer confirmed the developments on Thursday.

Actors Lakshmi Manchu, Praneetha, and Nidhi Agarwal are also among those implicated in the case. The complainant, a businessman, accused the celebrities and influencers of endorsing betting apps through various social media platforms, including pop-up advertisements.

The FIR registered on 19 March cites violations of pertinent sections of the BNS, Gaming Act, and IT Act. The police plan to issue notices to those named in the FIR as the investigation progresses.

The complainant reported that, during conversations with local youths, he observed many discussing investments in gambling and betting applications promoted by these celebrities. He revealed that he himself was tempted to deposit money into one such site but ultimately refrained due to advice from his family.

According to the complaint, while browsing social media, the individual encountered numerous celebrities and influencers actively promoting illegal betting websites and applications that encourage users to download them for gambling purposes. The complainant alleged that these public figures are accepting substantial commissions for their endorsements and are contributing to the addiction and financial distress of vulnerable individuals, especially those in dire need of money.

He requested the police to take appropriate action against both the gambling platforms and the individuals promoting them, stressing that thousands of rupees are at stake with these illegal operations.

The case highlights ongoing concerns regarding the influence of celebrities and social media on gambling behaviour among the public. —*PTI*

PINK MAGIC

A devotee dangles from the 'Bagad' as thousands attend the Bagad Rath Yatra festival at Bavdhan village in Satara, Maharashtra, on Wednesday. The chosen devotee, known as 'Bagadya', is suspended using an iron hook as a way of fulfilling the vows to Lord Bhairavnath, a Shaivite deity. The Bagadya observes a strict five-day fast, consuming only Neem leaves and abstaining from water, while residing in the temple until the main day of the yatra. During the festival the sacred Bagad or chariot of God with stone wheels is pulled by eight bullocks
PHOTO: PTI

US aims to bolster India ties as alliances shift

US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard capped off a two-day visit to India praising the "huge opportunities" for US-India ties, even as President Donald Trump's approach to foreign policy sets off alarm bells among Washington's partners around the world.

Gabbard, the first high-level official from Trump's second administration to visit India, told a security conference in New Delhi this week that Trump's "commitment" to ensuring peace and security is rooted in "realism" and "pragmatism."

Speaking at the annual Raisina Dialogue, Gabbard said that like Trump, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is also committed to putting his country "first."

"But this should not be misunderstood to mean that America first is America alone," Gabbard said, using one of Trump's most-popular slogans. "The relationships we build together are critical to advance our mutual interests."

Trump's recent moves calling NATO security commitments into question, while embracing Russian narratives on Ukraine, have alienated Washington's traditional allies in Europe. In Asia, allies wonder if they can count on Washington in a conflict with China.

Gabbard, who is at the head of 18 US intelligence agencies, told the strategic conference that achieving peace "requires leaders who challenge the established view, or, the way things have always been done."

During her remarks, Gabbard referred to Modi and Trump as "great friends." The leaders met last month in Washington for talks including trade and defense ties. After meeting Gabbard, Modi said that he looked forward to welcoming Trump to India later this year. Modi also joined Trump's social media platform Truth Social.

In an online post, Modi said he and Gabbard discussed sharing commitments to "combating terrorism and enhancing maritime and cyber security cooperation."

Chietigj Bajpaee, senior fellow for South Asia at the London-based foreign policy think tank Chatham House, told DW that Gabbard's visit "indicates the priority that Washington is attaching to its relationship with India".

"While this is not new, the India-US relationship has acquired renewed momentum under Trump as he places less value on traditional partners while seeking to forge a coalition of like-minded countries," Bajpaee said.

The US maintains a network of alliances in the Indo-Pacific, a strategic mega-region comprising the Indian Ocean around India, the South China Sea, and the western Pacific Ocean.

Gabbard is a former congresswoman from Hawaii who was born on the island of American Samoa. The US security chief is a practicing Hindu who has maintained ties with India, including as a member of the House India Caucus during her time in Congress. She has also faced criticism for her alleged support of the Hindutva.

In New Delhi, she said that the Indo-Pacific is the "geopolitical center of gravity for the 21st century."

"Ensuring peace and stability here is essential to our collective security, our objective of economic prosperity. We must tackle these challenges together," she said.

So far, language on the Indo-Pacific used by the Trump administration has remained consistent with that of the previous administration, with the State Department emphasizing the need to maintain a "free and open" region.

The elephant in the room, which the US and its partners see as threatening this "free and open" Indo-Pacific, is China.

Under President Xi Jinping, China has built the world's largest navy by number of ships. Beijing also claims most of the South China Sea — a vital chokepoint for global trade — as China's territory.

US Director of Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard gifts Prime Minister Narendra Modi a tulsi mala
PHOTO: PTI

Washington's long-term strategic priority is to keep Beijing from completely dominating the Indo-Pacific and maintain the free flow of international trade.

The US needs allies in the region but Trump is not known to value traditional multilateral alliance structures.

Trump has also remained ambiguous on US commitments to defending Taiwan, which China sees as a breakaway province, even as Beijing increases pressure on the self-ruled island following the election of President Lai Ching-te.

In an interview with Bloomberg before the US election, Trump, in his typical transactional style, criticized Taiwan for not paying enough on defense to deter China.

Although India is not formally allied with the US, it does share an interest in containing China.

"India is neither an official US ally [like Japan or South Korea], nor is it a US adversary [like China]. As such, it neither faces allegations of 'not pulling its weight' that US allies are, nor does it pose an existential threat to the US' global power like China," Chatham House analyst Chietigj Bajpaee said.

This is reflected in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or "Quad," which comprises Australia and Japan along with the US and India. The platform allows for informal coordination of strategic approaches in the Indo-Pacific, without the binding commitments that come along with alliances.

"It appears that there is a renewed commitment to the Quad, as indicated by the meeting of Quad foreign ministers shortly after Trump's inauguration," said Bajpaee.

"If anything, looser groupings like the Quad are preferred by the Trump administration over official alliance commitments such as NATO. There are some signs that the Trump administration may be seeking to pivot the Quad towards a greater focus on its security dimensions, but it is definitely not downgrading its engagement," he added.

—DW News

SALAR

Earth's 10 hottest years on record are the last 10

With the addition of 2024, yet another record-hot year, the past 10 years have been the 10 hottest in nearly 200 years of record-keeping, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reports.

"That's never happened before," said Chris Hewitt, the director of the WMO's climate services division. It marks the first time since record keeping began that all of the 10 hottest years have fallen within the most recent decade.

2024 was the single warmest year on record, surpassing even 2023's wide lead over other recent years. The planet's surface was approximately 1.55 degrees Celsius warmer than its average during a reference period that approximates the pre-industrial era, from 1850-1900.

The annual report from the WMO, a United Nations agency, includes input from dozens of experts and institutions from around the world and sheds further light on the record-breaking heat of 2024 and places it in the context of Earth's long-term warming from climate change. The extra energy in the atmosphere and the oceans helped fuel climate-related disasters around the globe. Extreme weather events like drought, storms and wildfires displaced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, the report says.

Atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases released from fossil fuel combustion continue to rise. In 2024, the concentration of carbon dioxide hit amounts unseen in at least two million years, according to the report.

Concentrations of two other important greenhouse gases, methane and nitrous oxide, reached levels unseen in at least 800,000 years. Homo sapiens, or modern humans, emerged around 300,000 years ago, so our species has never before experienced an atmosphere so laden with planet-warming greenhouse gases.

When countries signed the Paris Agreement in 2015, they agreed to try to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

"While a single year above 1.5 degrees C of warming does not indicate that the long-term temperature goals of the Paris Agreement are out of reach, it is a wake-up call that we are increasing the risks to the planet," Celeste Saulo, the secretary general of the WMO, said.

The new report estimates that long-term warming has reached 1.25 to 1.41 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, although the margins of error for some estimates extend beyond 1.5 degrees. The report authors estimate that last year, El Niño and other factors contributed an additional 0.1 or 0.2 of a degree of temporary warming.

El Niño is a natural climate pattern that tends to slightly raise the overall surface temperature of the planet. Record warmth, however, continued into 2025, even through El Niño's transition into the opposing pattern, La Niña.

"It's quite extraordinary to see that warmth continue for so long," John Kennedy, the report's scientific coordinator and lead author said. This warmth is apparent in the oceans, where key indicators of climate change are now accelerating.

The oceans have so far absorbed around 90 percent of the additional heat trapped inside Earth's atmosphere by greenhouse gases. The oceans' heat content — a way to measure this warmth throughout different depths — also reached a record high last year. Over the past two decades the oceans warmed more than twice as fast as they did from 1960 to 2005.

Increased ocean temperatures have had devastating consequences for marine life. By April 2024, warm-water corals had been bleached in every ocean basin where they grow.

Global average sea-level rise also reached a record high in 2024, the report said. The speed at which the seas are rising has also more than doubled in recent years: 4.7 millimeters per year in the past decade, from 2015 to 2024, compared with 2.1 millimeters per year from 1993 to 2002.

The World Meteorological Organization's work depends on international cooperation among its 101 member countries.

"Look at how weather has progressed since the initiation of the WMO in 1950; you now have the forecast on your smartphone," said Omar Baddour, the WMO's chief of climate monitoring. "You cannot believe how much collaboration is behind this."

Data from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which recently lost hundreds of workers due to the rapid cuts the Trump administration undertook this year, are included in the report.

— Courtesy, The New York Times

2024 was the single warmest year on record
PHOTO: PTI

LETTERS

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Trump aims to run Ukraine's power plants amid ceasefire talks

After months of worry over the possibility of nuclear accidents at the Zaporizhzhia power plant in Ukraine, the reactors were stopped in 2022 and the plant mainly dropped off as a topic of discussion. Until last weekend.

That was when President Trump suddenly said he intended to bring up Ukrainian power plants in his call on Tuesday with President Vladimir V Putin of Russia to discuss cease-fire proposals. While he did not specifically identify the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, which has been under Russian control since early in the war, his administration has strongly hinted at it.

According to a current Ukrainian official and a former one, both of whom have knowledge of talks between the United States and Ukraine, the plant may now be on the table because it is partly tied to negotiations over U.S. access to Ukrainian mineral resources.

The critical minerals deal that Trump wants is contingent on extracting and processing those minerals. And that takes a lot of energy, which the six-reactor Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, Europe's largest, could provide.

The phone call between Trump and Mr. Putin did not yield a broad cease-fire, although Russia said it would halt strikes on energy infrastructure if Ukraine would do the same. It was not initially clear if the fate of the Zaporizhzhia plant was discussed Tuesday, but neither the Kremlin nor the White House mentioned any such discussions after the phone call.

Kyiv and Washington have been negotiating for weeks over US access to Ukraine's untapped deposits of critical minerals, including lithium and titanium, which are crucial for manufacturing modern technologies.

Ukraine has told the United States that processing the minerals would be viable only if the Zaporizhzhia plant was back under its control, according to the two Ukrainians, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the talks between Ukraine and the Trump administration.

The currently serving Ukrainian official said the issue came up again last week during a top-level US-Ukraine meeting in Saudi Arabia to discuss a potential cease-fire.

The plant in question sits in Ukraine's southern region of Zaporizhzhia, which Russia has said it annexed despite controlling only part of the territory.

Worries over the safety of the plant continue in part because of its proximity to frontline fighting. And although all six reactors have been shut down — meaning they no longer generate electricity — they still require energy to power critical safety systems and cooling mechanisms to prevent a meltdown.

The United States might have an economic interest in seeing the plant back under Ukrainian control because it uses fuel and technology supplied by Westinghouse, an American nuclear technology company
PHOTO: PTI

Ukraine has repeatedly demanded that Russian forces leave the plant in order to reduce the risk of a nuclear accident.

For Ukraine, regaining control of the plant has obvious benefits. Andrian Prokip, an energy expert with the Kennan Institute in Washington, said Ukraine desperately needs the plant to ease power shortages caused by Russian attacks on electrical facilities.

The plant served nearly a quarter of Ukraine's electricity needs in 2021 before the war began, Prokip said.

The argument that the Zaporizhzhia facility would be needed to extract and process minerals emerged recently, as Ukraine and the United States negotiated the minerals deal.

That agreement would establish a jointly owned fund collecting revenues from new resource extraction projects covering oil, gas and minerals. Trump has presented it as a moneymaker, and one that will generate funds to pay the United States back for the billions it has spent aiding Ukraine during the war. The nuclear power plant is near several Ukrainian-controlled deposits of titanium, iron and rare earths.

The deal had been set to be signed at a White House meeting between Trump and President Volodymyr Zelensky last month. But the signing was delayed after the meeting devolved into a tense showdown. When Ukraine and the United States announced that Kyiv had agreed to back a monthlong cease-fire proposal last week, their joint statement said they would conclude the minerals deal "as soon as possible."

Energy experts also noted that the United States could have an economic interest in seeing the plant back under Ukrainian control because it uses fuel and technology supplied by Westinghouse, an American nuclear technology company.

- The plant in question is in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Kyiv has repeatedly demanded that Russia leaves the plant in order to reduce the risk of a nuclear accident

Victoria Voytsitska, a former Ukrainian lawmaker and senior member of the Parliament's energy committee, said fuel supplies to the plant "were a big contract" for Westinghouse.

Over the past three years of war, Westinghouse has expanded its presence in Ukraine, gradually replacing technology from the Russian nuclear giant Rosatom used in Ukrainian plants.

It remains unclear what Trump could offer to Russia to get it to hand over the plant to Ukraine.

Russia would likely demand something in return, Prokip said, such as the lifting of Western sanctions that have hurt its economy. "They will not just give this nuclear power plant back for free," he said.

—Courtesy, The New York Times

85 Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes on Gaza

Air raid sirens go off, explosions rock Jerusalem as Yemen's Houthi rebels resume attack

DEIR-AL-BALAH, 20 MARCH

Israeli strikes killed at least 85 Palestinians across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Thursday, according to information received from three hospitals. The strikes hit multiple homes in the middle of the night, killing men, women and children as they slept.

Israel resumed heavy strikes across Gaza on Tuesday, shattering a ceasefire that had halted the war and facilitated the release of more than two dozen hostages. Israel blamed the renewed fighting on Hamas because the militant group rejected a new proposal that departed from their signed agreement.

More than 400 Palestinians were killed on Tuesday alone, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. There have been no reports of Hamas firing rockets or carrying out other attacks.

One of the strikes early Thursday hit the Abu Daqa family's home in Abasan al-Kabira, a village just outside of Khan Younis near the border with Israel. It was inside an area the Israeli military evacuated earlier this week, encompassing most of eastern Gaza.

The strike killed at least 16 people, mostly women and children, according to the nearby European Hospital, which received the dead. Those killed included a father and his seven children, as well as the parents and brother of a month-old baby who survived along with her grandparents.

"Another tough night," said Hani Awad, who was helping rescuers search for more survivors in the rubble. "The house collapsed over the people's heads."

Buildings destroyed during the Israeli air and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday night **PHOTO: PTI**

Air raid on Israel

The Israeli military on Thursday said air raid sirens have sounded in several areas of the country following a missile attack from Yemen early in the day.

In Jerusalem, several explosions were heard shortly after the sirens sounded. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

Yemen's Houthi group this week resumed missile attacks following the collapse of Israel's ceasefire with Hamas.

Police also reported sirens in central Israel in the 4 am attack.

The MADA rescue service says it has received no reports of injuries.

Israel said Wednesday its troops retook part of Gaza, and its defense minister warned that attacks would intensify until Hamas frees dozens of hostages and gives up control of the territory. *—PTI*

TRUMP VOWS TO WIPE OUT HOUTHIS

DUBAI, 20 MARCH

US President Donald Trump threatened Yemen's Houthi rebels on Wednesday that they'll be "completely annihilated" as American airstrikes pounded locations under their control, while further pressuring the group's main benefactor Iran.

Strikes hit Sanaa, Yemen's rebel-held capital, as well as their stronghold of Saada in the country's northwest on Wednesday night, the Houthi's al-Maisrah satellite news channel reported. It aired footage showing firefighters battling a blaze in Sanaa and damaged at what it described as a sheep farm in al-Jawf.

It also said strikes happened overnight Tuesday, though the U.S. military has not offered a breakdown of places targeted since the airstrikes campaign began. The first strikes this weekend killed at least 53 people, including children, and wounded others.

As the strikes hit, Trump wrote on his Truth Social website that "tremendous damage has been inflicted upon the Houthi barbarians."

"Watch how it will get progressively worse — It's not even a fair fight, and never will be," Trump added. "They will be completely annihilated!" *—PTI*

ISRAEL ISOLATES NORTHERN GAZA

DEIR-AL-BALAH, 20 MARCH

The Israeli military on Thursday said that it will no longer allow Palestinians to enter northern Gaza from the south, restoring a blockade on the north it maintained for much of the war before January's ceasefire.

In an announcement on Thursday, the military warned people against using the territory's main north-south highway to enter or leave the north and said only passage to the south would be allowed along Gaza's coastal road. *—PTI*

Probe finds crashed Alaska plane was overweight

JUNEAU, 20 MARCH

A commuter plane that crashed on sea ice off Alaska, killing all 10 people on board, was half a ton overweight for a trip into icy conditions, the National Transportation Safety Board said in a preliminary report released Wednesday. The weight is just a "data point" in the ongoing investigation, cautioned Clint Johnson, who leads the NTSB's Alaska region adding that it is not yet determined whether this was a reason for the crash in icy cold conditions with freezing rain in Nome. A final report including probable causes can take a year or more after a crash. The 6 February Bering Air crash was one of Alaska's deadliest this century. *—PTI*

Man who spotted Konanki in DR leaves country

SANTO DOMINGO, 20 MARCH

Joshua Riibe, a senior at St. Cloud University in Minnesota who is believed to be the last person to see missing University of Pittsburgh student Sudiksha Konanki in the Dominican Republic (DR), left the Caribbean country on Wednesday, his lawyers said. Following a trial exceeding five hours, Judge Edwin Rijo ruled on Wednesday that Riibe, classified as a witness in a disappearance case, should have full rights under Dominican law and unrestricted freedom of movement. It was not immediately clear where Riibe traveled after leaving the Dominican Republic. Riibe had been detained by Dominican police, but on Tuesday. Judge Rijo ordered his release, saying he could cooperate with authorities without being detained. On Monday, Konanki's parents asked Dominican authorities to declare their daughter legally dead after acknowledging the extensive investigation by Police. *—PTI*

Turkey detains 37 over 'provocative' social media posts

ISTANBUL, 20 MARCH

In a move that has raised concerns over democracy, Turkish authorities detained 37 people for sharing "provocative" content on social media, said the interior minister Ali Yerlikaya on Thursday, as part of a crackdown on dissenting voices that escalated with the arrest of the mayor of Istanbul, a potential challenger to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Yerlikaya said 261 social media accounts that shared provocative posts inciting public hatred or crime were identified and 37 owners were detained, efforts to detain others were continuing. Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu was arrested after a raid on his residence on Wednesday as part of investigations into alleged corruption and terror links. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

No bail reprieve for suspended Lankan police chief

COLOMBO, 20 MARCH

Deshabandu Tennakoon, the suspended inspector general of police, was on Thursday refused bail in a case related to a shooting incident in 2023 and will now spend time in remand custody till 3 April. Tennakoon surrendered to the court on Wednesday after evading arrest for over two weeks. Officials said that he was kept in a special cell in isolation from the rest of the inmates at the Angunakolapelessa prison further south of Matara last night. The police chief had two days ago lost his appeal at the Court of Appeal to prevent his arrest. The Appeal Court refused his plea without a hearing. Tennakoon, under suspension since July 2024, is hiding since a court ordered his arrest. *—PTI*

CAPITAL BURNS

Sudanese army advances to takeover Presidential Palace

KHARTOUM, 20 MARCH

Sudan's army is about to overpower the Rapid Support Forces – the paramilitary – and take control of the Presidential Palace in Khartoum, state TV said on Thursday. The development will be a turning point in the two-year-old conflict that threatens the country's integrity. Intense clashes were reported from areas near the palace on Wednesday night.

The reports, citing witnesses and military, said there were explosions and airstrikes as the army advanced to central Khartoum.

As the war stretched to nearly two years, the Rapid Support Forces remained in control of the country's most of the western region and parts of the national capital of Khartoum, but its grip has been loosening in the central region to the army.

A coup in 2021 staged by the two military factions derailed a transition to civilian rule, and the conflict between the two forces began in April 2023 after failed plans for a new transition culminated in a war. The conflict has resulted in what the UN calls the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Both Rapid Support Forces and the army are also accused of resorting to widespread human rights abuses. *—Agencies*

Indian held for opposing US' Israel policy

NEW YORK, 20 MARCH

An Indian national enrolled as a postdoctoral fellow in the US has been detained by immigration authorities, said a media report, less than a week after a Columbia student from India self-deported following allegations of activities supporting Hamas. Badar Khan Suri's lawyer claimed that he is being punished "because of the Palestinian heritage of his wife, who is a US citizen, and because the government suspects that he and his wife oppose US foreign policy toward Israel."

Suri a former student of Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi is currently a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown university's Edmund A Walsh School of Foreign Service. A report in Politico said that

Badar Khan **PHOTO: X**

Suri, who was studying and teaching on a student visa, "masked agents" arrested him from outside his home in Virginia Monday night. A petition seeking his immediate release has been filed by his lawyer Hassan Ahmad, said that he was taken to a facility in Virginia and is "expected to be transferred soon to a detention centre in Texas." Adding that he was put in "deportation proceedings under the same rarely used provision of immigration law" that the government has invoked to try to deport Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia University graduate. Suri and his wife Mapheze Saleh has been alleged to have "ties with Hamas" and once worked for Al Jazeera have been "doxxed and smeared" on anonymously run, far-right websites. The petition further notes that Suri has no criminal record and has not been charged with a crime. Ahmad said he had not been able to contact Suri as of Wednesday evening. "We're trying to speak with him. That hasn't happened yet," Ahmad said. "This is just another example of our government abducting people the same way they abducted Khalil." *—PTI*

Canada, EU begin talks on defence purchases

TORONTO, 20 MARCH

Canada is in discussions with the European Union to join an EU drive to break its security dependency on the US, with a focus on buying more defence equipment, including fighter jets, in Europe, a senior Canadian government official confirmed on Wednesday.

The official said the plan includes building fighter jets in Canada. In Canada, Defense Minister Bill Blair has been tasked to review the purchase of America's F-35 jets to see if there are other options, an official said. *—PTI*

Rwanda-backed rebels seize mineral-rich town in Congo

GOMA/CONGO, 20 MARCH

Rwanda-backed M23 rebels have seized control of the strategic town of Walikale in eastern Congo, defying a ceasefire call from the Congolese and Rwandan presidents. The rebels' presence was confirmed by residents and civil society leaders, with Prince Kihangi, a former provincial deputy, stating that the rebels are visible at key locations in the town.

The capture of Walikale grants the M23 rebels access to a crucial road linking four provinces in eastern Congo, effectively cutting off the Congolese army's positions. Heavy artillery fire was reported throughout the day, but ceased in the evening, giving way to sporadic gunfire.

The escalation in fighting comes amid a decades-long conflict in eastern Congo, which has created one of the world's most significant humanitarian crises, with over 7 million people displaced. The M23 rebels are one of around 100 armed groups vying for control in the region, which is rich in minerals such as tin and gold.

The Walikale area is home to the largest tin deposits in Congo and several significant gold mines. The Bisie tin mine, located nearby, has temporarily halted operations due to the rebels' advance. The situation remains volatile, with the international community calling for a ceasefire and peaceful resolution to the conflict. *—PTI*

The capture of Walikale grants the M23 rebels access to a crucial road linking four provinces in eastern Congo **PHOTO: X**

Indonesia passes bill giving more control to Army

JAKARTA, 20 MARCH

Indonesia's parliament has passed revisions to the country's military law that critics say will expand the armed forces' role in civilian life. The new legislation allows military members to hold positions in 14 different branches of government, including disaster mitigation and the attorney general's office.

Under the previous version of the law, military personnel could serve in only 10 different government agencies. To hold civilian posts in other government institutions, officers were required to resign or retire from military service. The law was championed by Indonesia's president, former military general Prabowo Subianto, who served under late dictator Suharto's suppressive regime when over one million people were killed in East Timor. *—DW News*

Iran frees French citizen after more than 2 years

DUBAI, 20 MARCH

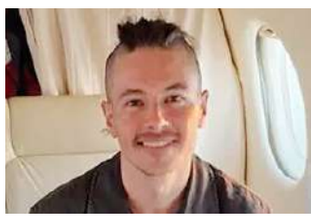
Amidst concerns over its rapidly advancing nuclear programme, a French citizen imprisoned in Iran for over 880 days has been freed, French officials said Thursday.

Former junior scrabble champion Grondeau was detained in October 2022 in Shiraz, during Mahsa Amini protests although the reason is not clear.

An Iranian court later sentenced the backpacker and world traveller to five years in prison on espionage charges that he, his family and the French government vigorously denied. He had been held at Tehran's notorious Evin prison, which holds Westerners, dual nationals and political prisoners often used by Tehran as bargaining chips in negotiations with the West.

Narrating his ordeal, he described lights being shined on prisoners day and night, as well as being blindfolded each time he was being taken out of his cell while in solitary confinement for 72 days. He later shared a cell with over a dozen prisoners.

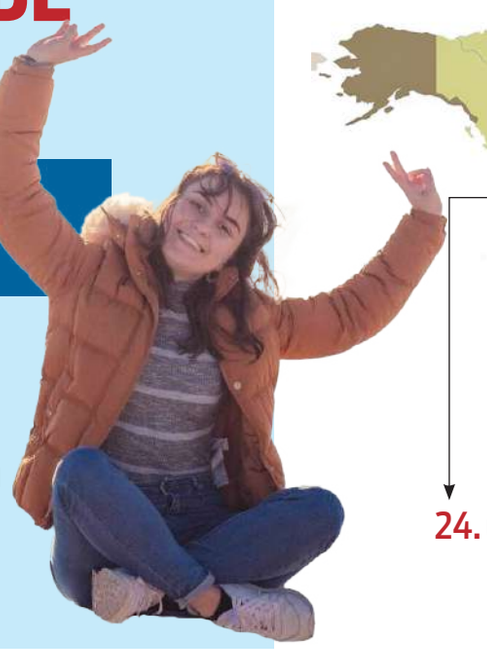
Asked if he had suffered ill treatment, he said: "If you look for bruises on my body you won't find any, because they are not that stupid." The release of Olivier Grondeau comes as France and the rest of Europe try to pursue negotiations with Iran over its rapidly advancing nuclear programme. *—PTI*

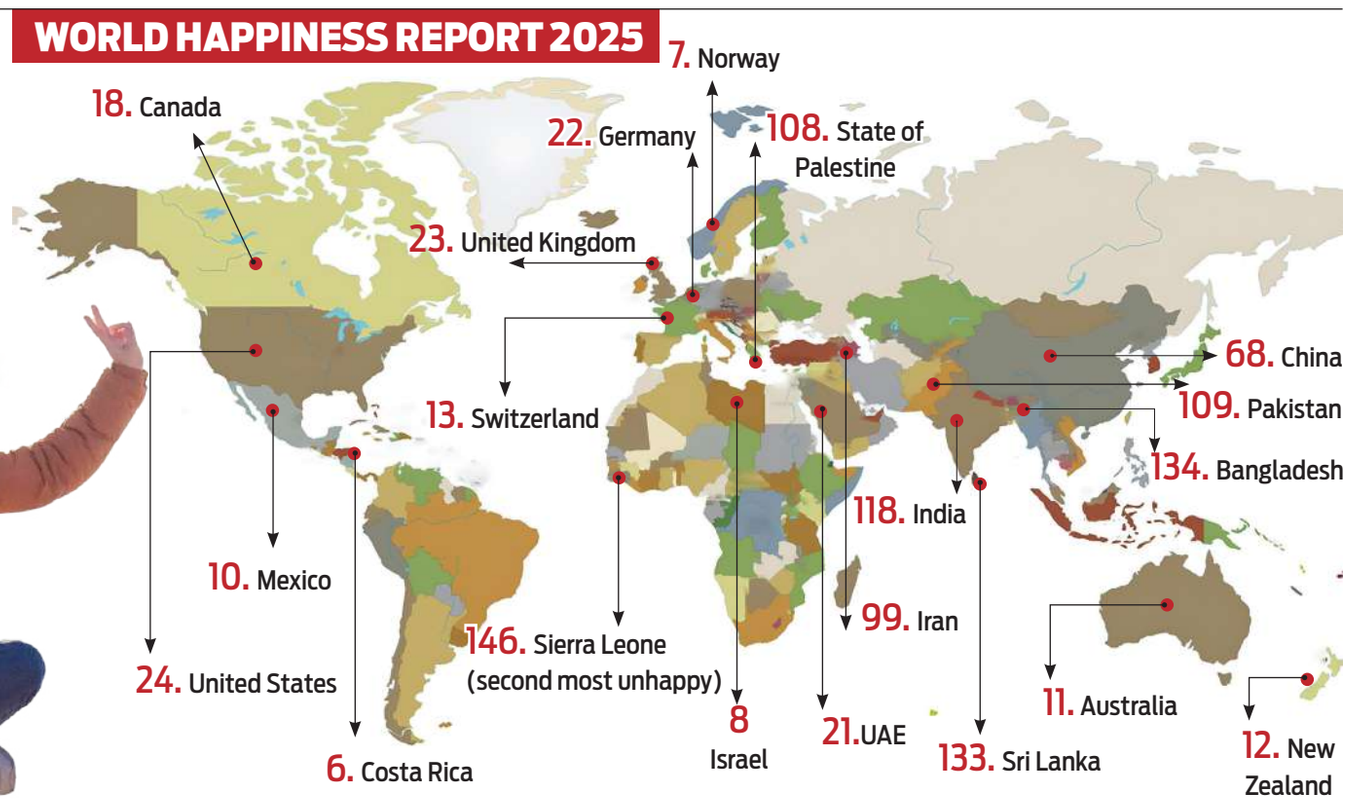


WANT TO BE HAPPY?

THEN VISIT THESE COUNTRIES...

Finland has secured its position as the world's happiest nation for the eighth consecutive year, as revealed in the World Happiness Report 2025 released on Thursday, while US has dropped to its lowest. Here is a list of the happiest nations in the world:





Rupee rises 1 paisa to close at 86.36 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

The rupee stayed firm and appreciated 1 paisa to close at 86.36 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday supported by positive domestic equities. Forex traders said the Indian rupee has staged a counterattack against external pressures, gaining support from strong foreign inflows into debt markets. However, risks remain due to unabated foreign institutional investor sell-off, and uncertainty surrounding Trump's tariff stance could pose challenges to the rupee's upward momentum. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.39 then touched an intraday high of 86.20 and a low of 86.41 against the greenback. The unit ended the session at 86.36 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 1 paisa from its previous closing level. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Gold falls ₹300 to ₹91,650 per 10 gram

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

Gold prices declined by Rs 300 to Rs 91,650 per 10 grams on Thursday, bringing an end to the three-day rally in the national capital, amid fall in precious metal rates globally, according to the All India Sarafa Association. On Wednesday, the precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity closed Rs 700 higher at its lifetime high of Rs 91,950 per 10 grams. Gold of 99.5 per cent purity, which ended the previous session at Rs 91,500 per 10 grams, slipped by Rs 300 to Rs 91,200 per 10 grams on Thursday. Silver prices also tanked by Rs 1,500 to Rs 1,02,000 per kg from Wednesday's closing level of Rs 1,03,500 per kg, also its historic high. *—PTI*

BMW and Renault to raise car prices in April

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

BMW Group India has announced a price increase of up to 3 per cent across its BMW and MINI car range, effective from 1 April 2025. This marks the second price hike for the carmaker this year, following a similar increase in January. Similarly, Renault India will raise prices for its entire model range by up to 2 per cent from the same date, marking its first price hike since February 2023. Several automakers, including Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, Tata Motors, Kia India, and Honda Cars, are similarly poised to increase vehicle prices next month. The rising input costs are cited as a primary reason for these increases throughout the automotive industry. *—PTI*

India positioned as a global tech hub: Nasscom Prez

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Technology is increasingly influencing economies worldwide, highlighting India's role as a leading global talent hub, asserted Nasscom President Rajesh Nambiar at the IT industry body's Global Confluence 2025 event. Emphasising the ongoing global technological shift, Nambiar noted the rising demand for high-quality talent to address new challenges and opportunities. He projected the IT industry's valuation to reach approximately USD 283 billion in FY25, surpassing USD 300 billion in the following year, with the digital economy's contribution to GDP expected to exceed USD 1 trillion by 2030. Notably, India claims 28 per cent of the global STEM talent market and boasts over 34,000 technology startups, underpinned by strong digital infrastructure. Nambiar expressed optimism about the growing potential of Global Capability Centres (GCCs) in the evolving tech landscape. *—PTI*

Sensex, Nifty surge as US Fed holds rate cut projections

IndusInd Bank and Bajaj Finance are the laggards

MUMBAI, 20 MARCH

Rallying for the fourth straight session, stock market benchmarks Sensex and Nifty surged over 1 per cent on Thursday, powered by across-the-board buying amid a mixed trend in global equities after the US Federal Reserve maintained its rate cut projections for this year.

Hectic buying in market heavyweights Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel and IT stocks also bolstered investor sentiment, traders said.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex jumped 899.01 points or 1.19 per cent to settle at 76,348.06, regaining the 76,000 level. During the day, it soared 1,007.2 points or 1.33 per cent to 76,456.25.

The NSE Nifty surged 283.05 points or 1.24 per cent to reclaim the 23,000-mark to finish at 23,190.65. From the Sensex pack, Bharti Airtel, Titan, Tata Consultancy Services, and Tata Motors were the biggest gainers. IndusInd Bank, Bajaj Finance and UltraTech Cement were the laggards. Shares of KEI Industries Ltd., Polycab India Ltd., Havells India Ltd.,and peers like RR Kabel, Finolex Cables declined up to 13 per cent on Thursday, March 20, after another conglomerate has announced a foray into this space. Federal Reserve said the US economy still looks healthy enough to keep interest rates unchanged.

"On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve announced its decision to keep the policy rate in the 4.25-4.50 per cent range. Policymakers anticipate two rate cuts in 2025, with economic growth projected at 1.7 per cent and inflation at 2.7 per cent for the year.

"Higher US interest rates could lead to foreign capital outflows from Indian markets, whereas lower rates may attract investment," Ravi Singh, SVP – Retail Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

In Asian markets, Seoul settled in the positive territory while Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. *—PTI*

Bharti Airtel, Titan, Tata Consultancy Services and Infosys are the biggest gainers PHOTO: PTI

- In Asian markets, Seoul settled in the positive territory while Shanghai and Hong Kong ended lower. Japan's Nikkei was closed for a holiday.European equity markets were trading lower. US markets ended significantly higher on Wednesday

Eli Lilly launches weight loss drug Mounjaro in India

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Eli Lilly and Company (India), a global pharmaceutical leader, has announced the launch of Mounjaro (tirzepatide) in India, a groundbreaking medication for the treatment of Type 2 diabetes and obesity.

The Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) has approved the drug, which is available in single-dose vials priced at Rs 3,500 for 2.5 mg and Rs 4,375 for 5 mg, leading to an estimated monthly cost of Rs 14,000-Rs 17,500, depending on the dosage.

Mounjaro is reportedly the first medication to target both GIP (glucose-dependent insulinotropic polypeptide) and GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) receptors, presenting a novel approach to managing metabolic health.

It is indicated as a supplementary treatment alongside diet and exercise for chronic weight management in individuals with obesity (BMI ≥30 kg/m²) and overweight (BMI ≥27 kg/m²) with weight-related conditions, while also improving glycemic control in adults with Type 2 diabetes. Winselow Tucker, President & GM of Lilly India, highlighted the urgent public health challenge posed by the dual burdens of diabetes and obesity in India, emphasising the company's commitment to enhancing awareness and management strategies for these conditions. Clinical trials showed Mounjaro leads to weight loss and improved blood sugar levels. The SURMOUNT-1 trial revealed average weight losses ranging from 15.4 kg to 21.8 kg over 72 weeks, significantly surpassing results from the placebo group. Dr Manish Mistry, Senior Medical Director for Lilly India, expressed enthusiasm about the introduction of Mounjaro, calling it a vital option for addressing the risks associated with diabetes and obesity in India. *—PTI*

Foreign airlines boost Indian carrier route: ICRA

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Indian airlines have a significant growth opportunity in international routes due to the ongoing dominance of foreign carriers, a report by the rating agency ICRA suggests.

International air passenger traffic for Indian carriers is anticipated to grow by 15-20 per cent in FY2025 and FY2026, outpacing the 7-10 per cent annual growth projected for domestic traffic. This expansion is driven by increased availability of e-visas and visas on arrival, alongside the Indian government's promotion of theme-based tourist centres and iconic destinations.

In the first nine months of FY2025, international air passenger traffic to and from India reached 5.69 million, marking an 11.4 per cent increase year-on-year and a 9.2 per cent rise compared to pre-Covid levels in FY2020. Indian carriers experienced a remarkable 40.7 per cent increase in international passenger traffic compared to pre-Covid figures, largely aided by the emergence of low-cost carriers (LCCs), which now account for 72 per cent of the total international traffic for Indian airlines.

Despite strongholds held by foreign airlines, which have maintained a market share of 55-60 per cent over the past three years, ICRA forecasts that Indian airlines could capture a larger market share through network expansions and the introduction of wide-body aircraft, enabling more long-haul international operations in the near future. *—ANI*

BOOSTING AI INFRA

SoftBank seals USD 6.5 billion deal for chip designer Ampere

TOKYO, 20 MARCH

PHOTO: X

SoftBank Group announced on Thursday that it will acquire Ampere Computing, a chip designer founded by former Intel executive Renee James, through a USD 6.5 billion all-cash deal as a strategic move to broaden its investment in AI infrastructure.

Ampere will be operating as a wholly-owned subsidiary of SoftBank after the deal, which is expected to close in the second half of 2025.

Carlyle and Oracle, Ampere's lead investors, will sell their shares in the Santa Clara, California startup. According to SoftBank's statement, Carlyle holds a 59.65 per cent stake while Oracle holds 32.27 per cent. The startup employs 1,000 semiconductor engineers.

In 2021, SoftBank considered acquiring a minority stake in Ampere, which was then valued at USD 8 billion, per Bloomberg.

SoftBank is the largest shareholder of Arm Holdings, and Ampere has developed a server chip based on the ARM compute platform, positioning the two companies are strong partners.

(Softbank acquired a British chip designer Arm for USD 32 billion in 2016, and it became publicly traded in 2023.) Ampere's customers include Google Cloud, Microsoft Azure, Oracle Cloud, Alibaba, and Tencent, as well as companies like HPE and Supermicro.

SoftBank stated the Ampere acquisition will bolster its capabilities in key areas like AI and compute and expedite its growth initiatives.

The most recent acquisition announcement follows a string of deals made by the Japanese tech mogul over the past few months, including its partnership with OpenAI to develop Advanced Enterprise AI called "Cristal intelligence."

—Courtesy, TechCrunch

PHOTO: X

Paytm to maintain strong contribution margin at 57%

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Paytm merchant network expanded by 9 per cent year-on-year (YoY) to 43 million in the third quarter of FY25, with merchants using Paytm's devices increasing by 10 per cent YoY to 11.7 million, according to Motilal Oswal report.

Despite a moderation in its Unified Payments Interface (UPI) market share, Paytm continues to hold a dominant position in the merchant payments business, with 85 per cent of its Gross Merchandise Value (GMV) coming from merchants. The company expects GMV to grow at a 24 per cent compound annual growth rate (CAGR) over FY25-27E.

Paytm is leveraging its expanding merchant network to boost loan distribution through the First Loss Default Guarantee (FLDG) model, partnering with 18 lending institutions.

This initiative is expected to drive loan disbursement growth at a CAGR of 29 per cent from FY25-27E and increase the contribution of the financial services business to 27 per cent of total revenue by FY28E, up from 20 per cent in FY24. This growth is also projected to fuel a 25 per cent CAGR in total revenue over the same period.

The financial services division plays a crucial role in Paytm's revenue diversification strategy, with 15-20 per cent of earnings coming from non-lending activities, such as equity broking and the sale of financial products.

The company has been expanding its network of lending partners, which is expected to exceed pre-regulatory restriction levels, reinforcing its stronghold in the market. *—PTI*

Adani Group in advance talks to acquire Emaar India

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Billionaire Gautam Adani's group is in advanced talks to acquire real estate company Emaar India for an enterprise value of around USD 1.4-1.5 billion as it looks to expand its property business, according to sources.

Dubai-based Emaar Properties entered the Indian real estate market in 2005 in partnership with India's MGF Development and invested Rs 8,500 crore through the joint venture firm Emaar MGF Land.

In April 2016, Emaar Properties decided to end the joint venture through a demerger process.

Emaar India has a large portfolio of residential and commercial spaces across Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Mohali, Lucknow, Indore and Jaipur.

According to sources, the talks between Dubai-based Emaar Properties and Adani Group are in an advanced stage. Adani Group and Emaar India declined to comment.

In January this year, Emaar Properties said, "The company would like to confirm that it is currently in discussion with a few groups in India, including Adani Group, for a potential sale of a stake in Emaar India. The valuation and the other terms of a potential transaction are not finalised".

Sources said that Emaar Properties is looking to sell stake in the Indian entity but the extent of dilution in shareholding is not decided yet.

Adani Group is active in the Indian real estate market through its unlisted entities Adani Realty and Adani Properties. Adani Realty has been developing many projects across major cities in India.

The group has also bagged redevelopment projects, including Dharavi which is one of Asia's largest slums in Mumbai.

After the Dharavi slum redevelopment project, Adani group has emerged as the highest bidder for the Rs 36,000 crore redevelopment of Motilal Nagar in Mumbai. *—PTI*

BILL GATES IN MUMBAI

Former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates meets Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis in Mumbai. The Gates Foundation will partner with the Maharashtra government to make the state malaria-free PHOTO: PTI

USERS USE 40 GB PER MONTH

India's 5G data use soars, set to triple by 2028

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Average 5G data consumption in India has skyrocketed to 40 GB per user per month, with the total subscriber base projected to grow by 2.65 times to approximately 770 million by 2028, according to a recent report from telecom equipment firm Nokia.

Nokia's annual Mobile Broadband Index (MBiT) report highlights a compounded annual growth rate of 19.5 per cent in data consumption across 4G and 5G networks, increasing to an average of 27.5 GB by 2024. Notably, the report notes a remarkable three-fold year-on-year increase in 5G data traffic in 2024.

Sandeep Saxena, Head of Technology and Solutions (Mobile Networks) at Nokia India, stated, "Average 5G data consumption per user was recorded at 40 GB in December 2024. We expect the 5G user base to grow to around 770 million by 2028, up from 290 million in 2024." It also highlights the significant growth of 5G Fixed Wireless Access (FWA), with users consuming over 12 times more data than average mobile users, driven by innovative services for both residential and business environments.

- Report also highlights the significant growth of 5G Fixed Wireless Access, with users consuming over 12 times more data than average mobile users, driven by innovative services for residential and business environments

The 5G device ecosystem in India is rapidly evolving, with the number of active 5G devices doubling year-on-year to reach 271 million in 2024. This trend is expected to continue, with nearly 90 per cent of smartphones expected to be 5G-capable by 2025. *—PTI*

EPFO net member addition rises 11.67% in Jan

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Retirement fund body, Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has added 17.89 lakh net members in January this year, reflecting a year-on-year growth of 11.67 per cent, according to payroll data released on Thursday.

An increase of 11.48 per cent has been registered in net payroll addition in the month under review compared to December 2024, a Labour Ministry statement said. EPFO has released provisional payroll data for January 2025, revealing a net addition of 17.89 lakh members.

Further, the year-on-year analysis reveals a growth of 11.67 per cent in net payroll additions compared to January 2024, signifying increased employment opportunities bolstered by EPFO's effective outreach initiatives, it added.

EPFO enrolled around 8.23 lakh new subscribers in January 2025. The new subscribers addition shows a growth of 1.87 per cent year-on-year. It also stated that a noticeable aspect of the data is the dominance of the 18-25 age group, as 4.70 lakh new subscribers were added in the category, constituting a significant 57.07 per cent of the total new subscribers added in January 2025.

New subscribers in the 18-25 age group added in the month show a growth of 3.07 per cent year-on-year. *—ANI*

PHOTO: X

Kirsty is first African to become IOC President

GREECE, 20 MARCH

Kirsty Coventry was been elected president of the International Olympic Committee as the first woman and first African to get perhaps the biggest job in global sports aged just 41.The Zimbabwe sports minister and two-time Olympic swimming gold medalist got a stunning first-round win in the seven-candidate contest after voting by nearly 100 of her colleagues in the IOC membership.It had been the most open and hard-to-call IOC presidential election in decades with no clear front-runner before the vote.—*PTI*

Boxing to be part of LA 2028 sports programme

COSTA NAVARINO, 20 MARCH

Boxing was on Thursday included in the Los Angeles Olympics 2028 after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) member states unanimously voted for it during the governing body's 144th session here. When IOC president Thomas Bach asked for a show of hands from all in favour of boxing's inclusion in the LA Games all the members duly obliged with no one abstaining or voting against it. "I thank you for the approval of having boxing back in the Olympic programme. We can look forward to a great boxing tournament," Bach said. "It doesn't happen often that the proposal for programmes happens unanimously but this commission is breaking record after record."—*PTI*

PHOTO: X

Ex-F1 team owner Eddie Jordan dies at 76

CAPE TOWN, 20 MARCH

Ex-Formula 1 team owner and media personality Eddie Jordan has died, according to a statement by his family to the PA news agency. He was 76.He ran his own Jordan team in the 1990s and 2000s in F1 and became a popular pundit on TV after selling the team in 2005.Jordan had been undergoing treatment for what he had called "quite aggressive" cancer of the bladder and prostate which spread to his spine and pelvis.The family statement said Jordan "passed away peacefully with family by his side in Cape Town" early Thursday."EJ brought an abundance of charisma, energy, and Irish charm everywhere he went.—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

AIFF exploring policies to bring OCI players: Kalyan

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

All India Football Federation president Kalyan Chaubey on Thursday said they are actively working on policies to integrate Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) players into the national team setup, acknowledging the ongoing struggle to find a top-quality striker. He also described the move as a potential "game-changer" for Indian football. One of the biggest challenges for Indian football remains the lack of a reliable striker, with the national team still dependent on 40-year-old forward Chhetri. Chhetri onWednesday came out of retirement to score in a 3-0—*PTI*

BCCI lifts saliva ban for IPL after captains' approval

In 2022, the world body made the ban permanent

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

The BCCI on Thursday lifted the ban on use of saliva on the ball in the upcoming Indian Premier League after a majority of captains agreed to its proposal, making it the first major cricket competition to do away with the restriction that was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision was taken at the captains' meeting in Mumbai ahead of the league starting on Saturday."The saliva ban has been lifted.

The majority of captains were in favor of the move. Some had reservations about the re-introduction, some sat on the fence but the majority of them supported the move," a top BCCI official told PTI.The International Cricket Council (ICC) banned the age-old practice of applying saliva to shine the ball as a precautionary measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which health practitioners advocated strict hygiene protocols and physical distancing.

In 2022, the world body made the ban permanent.The IPL too included the ICC ban in its playing conditions in the aftermath of the pandemic but its guidelines are outside the purview of the sport's governing body. With the development on Thursday, the IPL became the first major cricketing event to re-introduce saliva's use after the pandemic. The captain's meeting, which was scheduled to begin at 12.30 pm in Mumbai, did not start on time due to a delay in the arrival of a few team officials at the BCCI office.

All IPL 2025 team captains during a captains' meeting in Mumbai on Thursday PHOTO: X/INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Now that the ban is revoked in the IPL, the ICC too might review its stance on the subject.On the sidelines of the ICC Champions Trophy, senior India pacer Mohammed Shami had spoken about the need to use saliva on the ball in what has become a predominantly batters' game.

The likes of Vernon Philander and Tim Southee had backed Shami's call."We keep appealing that we should be allowed to use saliva so that we can bring reverse swing back into the game and it becomes interesting," Shami had said during the 50-over event in Dubai, where India emerged victorious.Also on the agenda of captains' meeting was the contentious Impact Player rule which the BCCI had already extended till at least 2027.

The likes of Rohit Sharma and more recently Hardik Pandya have expressed their reservations on the playing strategy."While a few have raised objections on the Impact Player rule, it has benefitted uncapped batters and bowlers who otherwise won't get to play," the official said.DRS extended to height and off-side wides.

The BCCI also approved the use of DRS for height wides and wides outside the off-stump."Hawkeye and ball tracking will be used to decide on the height wides and wides outside the off-stump," the official added.It was also decided that one ball would be changed in the second innings of an evening game after the 11th over due to dew."This is not a rule change, it's just an understanding for this year between teams and umpires. The changed ball will have wear and tear," an official said. —*PTI*

Siraj backs lifting of saliva ban

India pacer Mohammed Siraj on Thursday wholeheartedly welcomed the BCCI's decision to lift the saliva ban ahead of IPL 2025, saying it will help the bowlers find "reverse swing" even in benign conditions. The BCCI removed the ban on the use of saliva on the cricket ball after a majority of the team captains agreed to its proposal, making it the first major competition to do away with the restriction that was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. "It's very good for bowlers. It's excellent news for us bowlers because when the ball is not doing anything, applying saliva on the ball will increase the chances of finding some reverse swing," Siraj, who joined Gujarat Titans this season, told PTI.

INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE

Riyan Parag to lead Rajasthan in first 3 games

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

Rising star Riyan Parag will lead Rajasthan Royals in their first three IPL games as regular captain Sanju Samson has been told to avoid wicket-keeping duties by the BCCI due to a finger surgery, which means that he will only be available as a batter in these games.

Samson's finger was fractured after a Jofra Archer delivery hit him during the T20 International against England in Mumbai, following which he had to undergo a minor surgery last month.

While he has been cleared to bat, it is understood that medical and sports science teams at the BCCI's Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru have told him to give his fingers some more rest before he starts keeping wickets.

Therefore, the 23-year-old Parag will have the distinction of being one of the youngest captains in IPL. Virat Kohli holds the top position in that list having captained Royal Challengers Bengaluru as a 22-year-old.

"Rajasthan Royals have announced that Riyan Parag will lead the team for the first three matches of IPL 2025," RR said in a statement.

"The young all-rounder will take charge in the opening fixture against Sunrisers Hyderabad on March 23, followed by home encounters against defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders on March 26 and five-time champions Chennai Super Kings on March 30," the franchise stated.

Right balance between use of data: RCB's Mo Bobat

Relying on data science has become an integral part of IPL teams' planning and when blended with the perfect balance of "gut feel", it certainly improves decision making, feels RCB's Director of Cricket Mo Bobat.

Bobat, a former Performance Director at England and Wales Cricket, spoke about how one should be interpreting data and what should be used from the heap that is available currently in the cricketing ecosystem.

"The balance between using the data or trusting your gut feeling at the moment, if you can strike it right, it will always help decision-making improve," said Bobat, who has also worked as a consultant with RCB in the past.

Data is a "core currency" for leaders and how can make sense of the information available is key to success. —*PTI*

Team India to get ₹ 58 crore cash reward from BCCI

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

The BCCI on Thursday announced a cash reward of Rs 58 crore for the Indian cricket team that won the ICC Champions Trophy earlier this month in Dubai. The Rohit Sharma-led India defeated New Zealand by four wickets in the final to grab their third Champions Trophy title.

The financial windfall will cover the players, coaching and support staff, and members of the men's selection committee headed by Ajit Agarkar. The Board did not give a breakup of the reward in its statement. "Winning back-to-back ICC titles is special and this reward recognises Team India's dedication and excellence on the global stage," said BCCI president Roger Binny in a release. Binny said the Champions Trophy triumph is a testament to India's strong cricketing eco-system. "This was also our second ICC Trophy in 2025, following the ICC U19 Women's World Cup triumph and it highlights the strong cricketing ecosystem in place in our country," he said.

PHOTO: PTI

It was India's third ICC trophy in the last eight months as they had won last year's T20 World Cup, beating South Africa in the final.

BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia said the victory justified India's top ranking in white-ball formats.—*PTI*

India to host 11th Asian Swimming C'ship in Ahmedabad

NEW DELHI, 20 MARCH

India will host the 11th Asian Swimming Championship at Ahmedabad's Naranpura Sports Complex from October 1 to 15, the national federation announced on Thursday.

Swimmers from Japan and South Korea are expected to compete at the continental meet, marking the event's first-ever edition in the country.

"We have received in-principle approval from the Gujarat government and Asia Aquatics. The MoU is in its early stages and should be signed by March or mid-April," Swimming Federation of India Secretary-General Monal Chokshi told PTI.

The 10th Asian Age Group Championships in 2019 was the last international swimming event hosted by India.

The championship will feature swimming, diving, artistic swimming, and water polo. —*PTI*

SWISS OPEN

Sindhu fails in 1st round, Srikanth moves to pre-QFs

BASEL, 20 MARCH

Two-time Olympic medalist and former world champion PV Sindhu made a first-round exit from the ongoing Swiss Open badminton tournament, continuing her horror run on the Badminton World Federation (BWF) World Tour this year.

Sindhu, the world number 17, lost to world number 31 Julie Jakobsen 21-17, 21-19 in a 61-minute match, as per Olympics.com.

With this loss, Sindhu has registered her third successive first-round exit during this year. She started the year by reaching the quarterfinals of the Indian Open, but could not make it past round one in the Indonesia Masters, All England Open, and now the Swiss Open, which she won back in 2022.

Coming to the men's singles competition, Kidambi Srikanth overcame a tough match against compatriot HS Prannoy during the opening round, beating him in a tough-ly-contested 23-21, 23-21. Srikanth, who has dropped down to 49th place in the men's singles world rankings, will be facing world number six of China, Li Shifeng in his round of 16 match.

PV Sindhu and Kidambi Srikanth PHOTO: X

India's Priyanshu Rajawat entered the pre-quarterfinals of the men's singles event of the Swiss Open Super 300 badminton tournament with a straight-game win over local player Tobias Kuenzi here.

Rajawat, ranked 35th in the world, beat Kuenzi 21-10 21-11 in just 29 minutes in an opening-round match late Wednesday to set up a clash with Toma Junior Popov of France. —*PTI*

KKR-LSG clash shifted from Kolkata to Guwahati

KOLKATA, 20 MARCH

Kolkata Knight Riders' home game against Lucknow Super Giants on 6 April is set to be shifted to Guwahati as police have expressed their inability to provide security for the IPL contest due to 'Ram Navami' celebrations in the city on the day, CAB president Snehasish Ganguly told PTI on Thursday.BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari announced that over 20,000 processions are being organized across West Bengal to celebrate the festival. "We have informed the BCCI to reschedule the match, but there is no scope for rescheduling the game in the city later, and I'm now hearing that it's going to be shifted to Guwahati," Ganguly said.

The clash between KKR and LSG, owned by RPSG Group chairman Sanjiv Goenka, was expected to draw a packed house, with both teams boasting strong local support. An official statement from the IPL, however, is yet to arrive. —*PTI*

Diksha is off to a solid start

MINSK, 20 MARCH

Undeterred by the missed cut last week, Indian golfer Diksha Dagar, a two-time Ladies European Tour winner, shot a fine 4-under 67 to be placed tied fourth after the first round of the Ford Women's NSW Open in Wollongong on Thursday.

Starting from the ninth, which is the first hole on the back nine of the Wollongong Golf Club, Diksha opened with a bogey but then had seven birdies in the next 10 holes. Her fortunes reversed as she dropped three shots in four holes the third, fifth, and the sixth before picking up a last birdie on the seventh. —*PTI*

WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Manchester City ends Chelsea's unbeaten run with 2-0 win

MANCHESTER, 20 MARCH

Manchester City ended Chelsea's unbeaten run this season as Vivianne Miedema scored twice to give her team a 2-0 win in the Women's Champions League quarterfinals on Wednesday.

Four days after Chelsea beat City to win the English League Cup, injury-hit City became the first team to beat Chelsea under coach Sonia Bompastor in her team's 29th game of the season.

Miedema came off the bench at halftime and made the difference in the 60th minute, pouncing on the rebound after Chelsea goalkeeper Hannah Hampton tipped Laia Aleixandri's header onto the crossbar. Her second was a clinical finish in the 89th off Kerolin's pass after Chelsea had been pushing to level the score. It was a triumphant display of the impact Miedema can still have at the Champions League level despite repeated setbacks with knee injuries since tearing her ACL in 2022. Her most recent operation was just five months ago.

Manchester City's Vivianne Miedema, front, celebrates after scoring the opening goal during the Women's Champions League PHOTO: X

Chelsea had one goal by Mayra Ramirez ruled out for offside before Johanna Rytting Kaneryd nearly scored soon after with a shot that hit the bar. —*PTI*

Azarenka cruises into Miami Open second round

MINSK, 20 MARCH

Belarus' world number 32 Victoria Azarenka went off to a good start in the Miami Open seeing off world number 55 Anhelina Kalinina of Ukraine, 6-3, 6-1 in the opener, BelTA has learned.

The match lasted for an hour and three minutes. Victoria Azarenka will next face World No.14 Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic. Victoria Azarenka won the event in Miami in 2009, 2011, and 2016.

Belarus' world number one Aryna Sabalenka will take on world number 64 Viktoriya Tomova of Bulgaria at the start of the Miami Open. If Aryna Sabalenka succeeds against Viktoriya Tomova, she will next play either Poland's world number 27 Magdalena Froch, or Romania's world number 102 Elena-Gabriela Ruse.

The total prize money in the 2025 Miami Open, which is to be over on 30 March, is $8.9 million. The winner will earn $1.2 million and 1,000 points. —*PTI*

Victoria Azarenka PHOTO: X

Gael Monfils makes history

Gael Monfils made history at the Miami Open as he became the second-oldest man to win a match at the ATP Masters 1000 event after Jimmy Connors. ATP No. 1 Club member Connors is the oldest man to win a match in Miami, having done so at 39 in 1992. The 38-year-old Frenchman overcame last year's quarterfinalist Fabian Marozsan 6-3, 3-6, 6-4 to reach the second round in Florida after one hour and 44 minutes, ATP reports. Monfils struck 38 winners and committed 18 unforced errors to clinch victory and set up a meeting with Jiri.